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# Finding The Middle Class in Three Ancient Societies

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# Finding The Middle Class in Three Ancient Societies

*A Senior Project in Classics  
By Deirdre Lewis, Class of 2011  
Thesis Advisor: Barbara Olsen*

*Dedicated to my father Mark Lewis*

*Who inspired me to major in Classics, and bullied me into taking Economics*

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental features of human society is the gap between the rich and the poor. The divide between “haves” and “have nots” has fueled conflict and culture since Antiquity. This divide is evident even in academic study. Classical Studies gives a huge amount of focus to the upper classes of ancient societies. From the megarons of Mycenae to Julius Caesar, it is by far the rich and powerful who are studied most while the middle and lower classes are given only cursory attention. It is on these people, the middle class of Antiquity, that this study will focus; who they were, if they existed, and how they might have lived.

Before diving into such a broad topic it is first necessary to define the concept of “class”. Class is a thoroughly modern notion. In current society we are so used to terms like “working class”, “middle class”, and “upper class” it is easy to forget that these ideas are only two centuries old. The idea of class, and particularly class struggle, is rooted in Marxist theory which arose during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is perhaps best typified by the famous opening lines of Marx’s Communist Manifesto, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”<sup>1</sup> Marx argues that class is as old as society itself, stretching beyond Rome into deep antiquity.

The application of the term “class” to ancient societies is certainly controversial. Classical scholar M.I. Finley notes the inadequacy of applying modern ideas of class on a pre-capitalist society. It is not “a sufficiently demarcated category for our purposes... we are still left with the necessity of finding a term that will encompass the Spartan “Inferiors” (citizens, technically, who had lost their holdings of land), the nobility of the late Roman Republic, the

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." *Marxists Internet Archive*.  
<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>>.

early Hellenistic kings...’’<sup>2</sup> and so on. While Karl Marx envisioned a grand class struggle stretching deep into antiquity, including the patrician versus the plebian, Finley points out that class struggle in Rome belonged to a small minority, between free rich and free poor, while the “the great productive mass of the population, the slaves, formed the purely passive pedestal for the combatants.”<sup>3</sup>

So on the one hand it can be argued that class is a clumsy and misleading way to think about economic roles in antiquity. But at the same time there certainly were similar rank divisions in ancient culture. No one will dispute that there were rich people and poor people in Antiquity. Since these societies were pre-industrial and mostly agriculturally based, often the rich were composed of a small group of elites while the poor encompassed the body of working farmers. What we would think of as the middle “class” encompasses whatever fell in between, regardless of the terminology employed. British historian G.E.M. de Ste. Croix soundly thrashes Finley’s ideas, stating that they “rest on a serious misunderstanding of what Marx meant by class”<sup>4</sup> and that it is “class relationship that matters to Marx, rather than any stratification according to status.”<sup>5</sup> Since we must start somewhere, and since Karl Marx himself did not shirk from applying the concept of class to the entire corpus of human history, from here on we will use the concept of class to examine our question and leave doubts of whether that is appropriate to more adventurous economic historians.

Let us return to the question of what was “in between” so to speak, the middle class. Class complexity arises from economic complexity; so in order for a middle class to emerge and differentiate itself from the lower classes there needed to be alternative paths to wealth than

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<sup>2</sup> M. I. Finley. *The Ancient Economy*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 50.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 184.

<sup>4</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 91.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* 89-91.

being born into landed aristocracy. In the case of a pre-industrial society that still possessed a complex economic system, such as Rome, there were a variety of ways to achieve this. But in an extremely agrarian system, such as Bronze Age Greece, the middle class could conceivably be absent all together due to the lack of industry. While this may seem preposterous to the modern mind, it is not an unreasonable assertion for a rudimentary society which lived vastly differently than we do.

The middle class is an artificial, catch-all category. By definition, the middle class is those people who are neither upper nor lower class. Thus the middle class might encompass a wide variety of groups who have little or nothing to do with one another, with varying backgrounds and competing interests. So while a middle class may have existed, that does not mean it was a unified group.

The aim of this study is to explore the nature of middle class in three separate ancient societies; Mycenaean Greece, Classical Greece, and Late Republican/Early Imperial Rome. Based on the society the chapters will take on slightly different aims; for example in the case of Mycenae it is difficult enough to prove the existence of these people, let alone specifying their professions or how big a group they were. In Rome however, the middle class is much better attested and more time will be devoted to discussing how they might have lived and what kind of prestige they held in society.

The study of the middle class is a worthwhile endeavor because it represents an understudied and underserved group of people. The study of Classical history is preoccupied with what it can see and what it can read; which consists mostly of the buildings of the rich and powerful and the opinions of the rich and powerful. It is surprisingly easy to forget that this does not reflect the majority of society. The study of ancient middle classes rightfully returns a group

of enterprising individuals to the body of history; people who found ways to make better lives for themselves in the midst of fundamentally inequitable societies.

## CHAPTER 1 – BRONZE AGE GREECE: MYCENAE

For the first ancient society we turn to Mycenae; home of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and founded by Perseus. From Homer to Schliemann to today, the city has never ceased drawing the imagination. While the site was never truly lost, its dramatic excavation by Heinrich Schliemann in 1874 revived interest in ancient Mycenae and lead directly to the field of Bronze Age archaeology.

Mycenae conjures up images of Agamemnon on his throne, of the scores of people working in his palace, of the Greek generals directing the army to Troy. These are the people we see best from Mycenae, the incredibly rich and the incredibly poor. But while they are difficult to find, there is a definite middle class present in Mycenaean society.

### *Description of Site*

The site of Mycenae is a large hill on the Argolid plain. It is naturally fortified by a steep ravine on one side, and so was an attractive location to settle. There is evidence for Bronze Age culture in mainland Greece as early as 3100 BC, however any early evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age culture seems to have been obscured by the original haphazard excavations of Mycenae.<sup>6</sup> The earliest definitive evidence of the site of Mycenae being inhabited is during the Middle Helladic period, approximately 2200 BC.<sup>7</sup> Mycenaean society took a huge leap forward around 1600 BC, when an elaborate series of graves were constructed containing some of the most famous artifacts of Mycenae, including the so-called Mask of Agamemnon. The society which produced these elaborate burials remains something of a mystery, since there are no

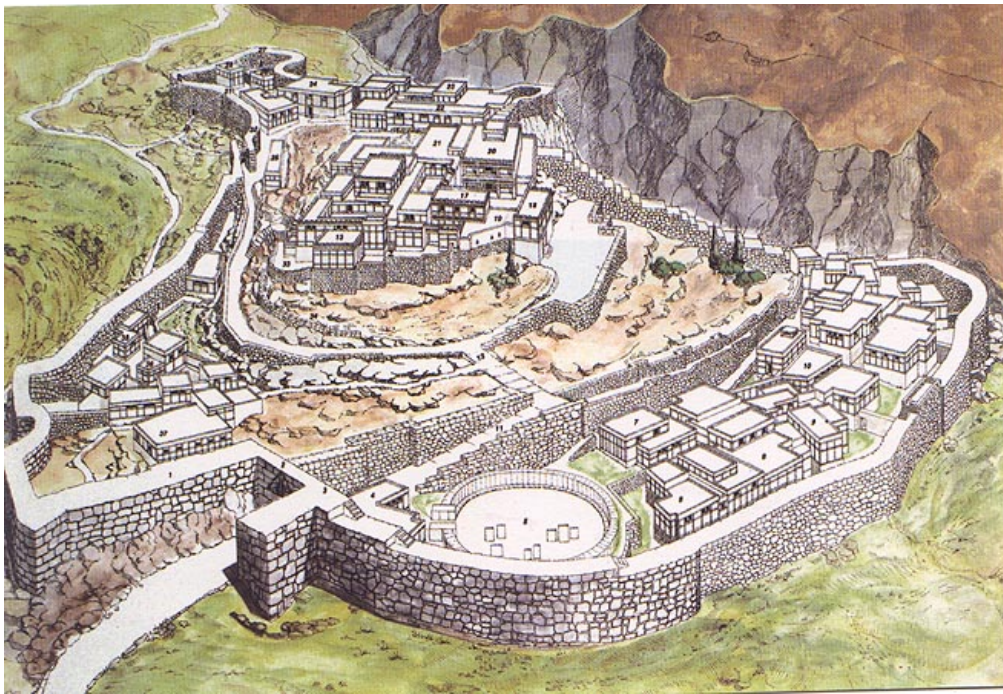
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<sup>6</sup> Fields, Nic. *Mycenaean Citadels C. 1350-1200 BC*. (Oxford: Osprey, 2004) 9.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* 9.

discernible contemporary structures.<sup>8</sup> Presumably, this is because the original village was built in wood or mud brick and did not withstand the test of time.

Mycenae rose to power on the mainland around 1400 BC when the palace complex was built.<sup>9</sup> For the next two centuries, Mycenae was one of the most important settlements in Bronze Age Greece. It was an economic center and a major military power. The palace itself was located inside a fortified citadel with walls so impressive later Greeks thought they were built by Cyclops. Inside the citadel were important cultural sites, such as the grave circle, and the homes of rich citizens. Much of the rest of the population lived outside the shelter of the Cyclopean walls, but presumably they could take shelter inside during times of conflict.



*Figure 1 – Artistic Rendering of Mycenae*

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<sup>8</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah B., Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer T. Roberts. *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 32.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* 32.

### *Description of Sources*

History generally never fails to remember the people at the top of the ladder. In most societies, it is the people at bottom who get left out of the historical record. However in Mycenaean Greece it is the middle class who are the most invisible. This is because of the nature of the sources available. The only written documents which survive to us from Mycenaean Greece are Linear B tablets, which deal explicitly with high-ranking political and religious officials, and the masses of slaves and other palace dependents who worked and supported the palaces. In their groundbreaking book which deciphered the Linear B tablets, Michael Ventris and John Chadwick noted “A monarchical system of government is proved for both Knossos and Pylos by references to the king (wanax); the absence of any further qualification shows that the state knew one king only”<sup>10</sup> and later “Of the humbler members of the population we can say less. The variety of trades followed shows a highly developed division of labour, but it is not clear how far the craftsmen were royal servants, or even slaves.”<sup>11</sup> The middle class, falling into neither of these categories, largely drops out of the written record.

It is important to note that most of Ventris and Chadwick’s written evidence of Mycenaean culture comes from Pylos where nearly 1100 Linear B tablets were found, while only about 70 tablets have been discovered at Mycenae. However, the findings from Pylos are generalized to Mycenae because Ventris and Chadwick argue “there is no reason to assume that Pylos was exceptional.”<sup>12</sup>

The archaeological evidence used will focus on the site of Mycenae, with additional evidence from other sites to supplement arguments. Like the written sources, archaeology also

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<sup>10</sup> Ventris, Michael, John Chadwick, and A. J. B. Wace. *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.) 120.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 122.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* 120.

has frustratingly little to say about the middle class. It tends to notice big things such as megarons and walls, the evidence of the upper class and their power structure. People who lived more modestly may have built in wood or mud brick, which is long since lost. The inadequacy of both the archaeological and written sources is a fundamental problem which confronts all of Aegean Bronze Age scholarship, and we will never cease grappling with it here.

Because of the deficiency of the sources, the data available must be used creatively and carefully. The economic records will closely be examined to attempt to discern beyond the concerns of the upper and lower classes and see where a middle class might fit in. Ethnographic analogies will also be used. Finally later sources will be used as a way of extrapolating back to an earlier age. For example, while this paper is specifically seeking evidence for a middle class in the Mycenaean period, necessity calls for the use of the Homeric epics as a source. While Homer probably represents a later post-collapse version of Mycenaean society, there are echoes of the grander Mycenaean culture within it, so Homer may be used to make some educated guesses about Mycenaean society.

#### *Definition of Middle Class in Mycenaean Society*

In order to prove the presence of a middle class in Mycenaean Greece, it is first necessary to define middle class. One of the best ways to begin thinking about the definition of middle class is to examine class boundaries; the rules which define when one crosses that imaginary line from lower to middle or from middle to upper.

The line between the lower class and the middle class is fairly clear. Those in slavery represent the lowest class. The concept of slavery is attested in Linear B tablets, so we know



some form of it must have existed at Mycenae.<sup>13</sup> What is difficult is to determine who is a slave and who is not. In the palace, there are a huge number of workers who are not explicitly named as slaves. However, the caloric reward they receive for their labor and the fact that the palace has control over the lives of their children should imply to us they are indeed slaves.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from slaves, there is another group of people who may have belonged to the lower classes. This is the *thes*, or day laborer, who is free but owned no land nor belonged to a family. While the *thes* was free, it could be argued that it was worse to be a *thes* than to be a slave. When Odysseus reaches the Underworld and meets Achilles, Achilles says

O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.  
I would rather follow the plow as a thrall to another  
man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,  
than be a king over all the perished dead.<sup>15</sup>

Achilles essentially says the only thing worse than being a *thes* is being dead! While all Homeric evidence should be taken with a grain of salt, the Homeric epics to a certain extent do reflect the opinions and attitudes of Mycenaean cultures. So it appears that an important qualification for leaving the lower classes is to have a certain level of autonomy; if the product of your work is dedicated towards the benefit of another while you do not profit off of it, you are lower class. The question of whether you are free or a slave is of secondary importance.

It is important to note that the argument that a *thes* represents lower class is exclusively based in Homer, which is a problematic source at best. While many of the attitudes expressed in Homer seem to reflect Mycenaean culture, they are blended with Dark Age Greece. As such,

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid* 124.

<sup>14</sup> R. Palmer, "Subsistence Rations at Pylos and Knossos," *Minos* 24 (1989): 89-124.

<sup>15</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007) 180.

there is no definitive proof other than Homer that thetes even existed in Mycenaean culture, and easily may have been a Dark Age institution. Certainly if they did exist, they likely were not a particularly large group based on the centralized nature of the Mycenaean economy.

While the line between lower and middle class is relatively clear, the line between upper class and middle class in Mycenae is extremely blurry. What constituted a very rich middle class man as opposed to a noble?

To examine this question, consider the House of the Oil Merchant inside the walls of Mycenae. It is a large house, and inside were found huge storage pithoi containing oil. Most interestingly, the House of the Oil Merchant offered the first Linear B tablets which were not found in a palatial structure. Like all Linear B tablets, these are likely to be accounts.<sup>16</sup>



*Figure 2 – The House of the Oil Merchant as it stands today.*

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<sup>16</sup> Wace, A. J.B. "Mycenae, 1952." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953) 131.

Unfortunately it is impossible to go back in time and ask the man living in the House of the Oil Merchant whether he saw himself more at home with the nobles or hobnobbing with the hoi polloi, so we must turn to archaeology to identify his class status. The fact that his house is inside the walls is significant, since he receives more protection than those living outside of them. His wealth is instantly apparent by the grandeur of the house relative to most Bronze Age structures. Most importantly, he, or perhaps a scribe he hires, is keeping records of his financial transactions in Linear B. This means that he, or someone working for him, must be educated in Linear B and therefore literate. This evidence of literacy, beyond even his wealth and prestigious location, seems to scream upper class.

But on the other hand... how do we know that wealth was enough to break into the upper echelons of society? There's no evidence here that he was part of the political structure, and history is full of societies where membership in a class was a birthright, not something you could earn. Perhaps the Oil Merchant is a member of a rich merchant class, not the upper class.

When neither the written sources nor archaeology can provide a conclusive answer, it is time to turn to comparative anthropology. J.S. Hutchinson, who wrote a detailed study comparing Mycenaean and Medieval estate economies, notes the power of this technique by pointing out that "might not a later period have faced the same basic problems of economics as the earlier and obscurer age, and might not the problems have been tackled in the same way, the same solutions found the same mistakes made?"<sup>17</sup> Hutchinson found striking parallels between Mycenaean and Medieval cultures in terms of units of consumption, population boom, cultural flowering, and extent of external trade. While her conclusions regarding land tenure will be

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<sup>17</sup> Hutchinson, J. S. "Mycenaean Kingdoms and Medieval Estates (An Analogical Approach to the History of LH III)." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 26.1 (1977): 3.

considered later, for the moment it is sufficient to note the class divisions in medieval society. An upper class, which was composed of ruling elite, controlled medieval manors and did not labor for a living. An overwhelmingly larger lower class, serfs, worked the land for little more than basic sustenance. A small group of free tradesman composed a category somewhere in between.

Just for a moment, let us use this power of analogy and take our minds out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC in Greece and turn to 18<sup>th</sup> century France. It is a society on the eve of revolution, where an antiquated system of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> estates is about to come violently to an end. Economic growth is the cause of all the chaos that is about to ensue. As society has advanced and industrialized, a new merchant class has formed within the 3<sup>rd</sup> estate, the *bourgeoisie*. These families have grown rich, but still lack political power. What separates them from their upper class compatriots is that they work for a living, whereas the nobility had inherited their property and their social status. This unfortunately did not sit well with the *bourgeoisie*, but the results of their irritation are beyond the scope of this study.

If perhaps the analogies to Medieval and Early Modern Europe are too far a stretch for Bronze Age scholarship - after all they are several thousand years removed from it - there is a much closer example. The equestrian class of Ancient Rome lived under similar rules to the bourgeoisie of 18<sup>th</sup> century France. They were a class that had grown rich independently of Rome's landed upper class, but also lacked lay political power. Rome explicitly excluded those who engaged in commerce from participating in politics. Politics was the realm of the landed gentry, men who expressed their wealth in vast amounts of land which other people farmed for them.

In all three analogies, the middle class both works for its living and is excluded from political power. This will become our defining characteristic for the line between middle and upper class. As the bourgeoisie discovered, it does not matter how rich one might become, the status symbol of working is the inescapable marker of middle class status. Meanwhile the upper class, synonymous with the ruling elite, inherited their wealth and status and hire others to do their work for them. It is no coincidence that the verb for “labor” in Greek, *poneo*, is also the root of the adjective “wretched” or “good for nothing”, *poneros*.

This definition places land control as an important dividing line between middle class and upper class. In an agrarian society like Mycenae, hiring others to do your work means that you own huge tracts of land which others farm for you. Middle class members may own land, and may even hire day laborers to help them farm it, but more likely middle class members are craftsmen or tradesmen who have found a way to make money outside of the serf system.

The growth of these class divisions can be attributed to the growth of the economy. Where initially there was simply master and slave (or 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> estate), the development of society allowed for more people to leave the farm and find alternative paths to wealth, to join the equivalent of the bourgeoisie. Under this definition, for all the luxury and prestige the Oil Merchant may have possessed he is placed firmly in the middle class since he works for a living and has no clear connection to palatial authority.

To acknowledge the skeptics, this conclusion is based largely on analogy. The direct evidence for such a division in Mycenaean Greece is nearly non-existent due to a lack of written sources. The only whisper that makes it down to us on this issue is not even Mycenaean, but Homeric, which is not completely representative of Mycenaean culture. However it strongly

corroborates this argument. In Phaeacia, an athlete mocks Odysseus for not wishing to participate in the games by suggesting he is a rower on a ship.

No, stranger, for I do not see that you are like one versed  
In contests, such as now are practiced much among people  
But rather to one who plies his ways in his many locked vessel,  
Master over mariners who also are men of business,  
A man who, careful of his cargo and grasping for profits  
Goes carefully on his way. You do not resemble an athlete.<sup>18</sup>

Odysseus becomes wildly insulted. He snaps that “your appearance is conspicuous, and not a god even would make it otherwise, and yet the mind there is worthless... you have stirred up anger deep in the breast within me.”<sup>19</sup> For comparison, Telemachus, who is of similar rank to his father, is not even ruffled when Nestor asks him if he is a pirate. When Nestor first meets Telemachus, Nestor asks him

Strangers, who are you? From where do you come sailing over the watery  
Ways? Is it on some bu<sup>20</sup>ss, or are you recklessly roving  
As pirates do, when they sail on the salt sea and venture  
Their lives as they wander, bringing evil to alien people?<sup>21</sup>

Telemachus for his part, simply replies “you ask us where we come from. Therefore I will tell you. We come from Ithaka under the mountain Neion.”<sup>22</sup>

To modern eyes this might seem to be an absurd discrepancy; Odysseus is insulted when asked if he does honest work while Telemachus does not mind being accused of piracy. To understand this let us consider Odysseus in our class model. Odysseus is firmly in the category

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<sup>18</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007) 125.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 125.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid* 125.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* 53.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid* 53.

of upper class. He does not work for a living, but rather owns a huge number of flocks which others, like his swineherd Eumaeus, tend for him. If that were not enough, he is a King. The suggestion that Odysseus might work for a living is simply too much for his ample pride. It implies that Odysseus is a lower class than he is, and so he is offended. Piracy on the other hand was a common practice in the Aegean and hardly carried the stigma to which we ascribe. It was a path to glory; Odysseus does his fair share of both piracy and glorious boasting about it.

Up until this point, this paper has tip-toed around an important group of people who are difficult to categorize; religious officials. Priests and priestesses are well attested in Linear B tablets. “Slave of the God” is also a common label; in fact there appear to have been more of them than traditional slaves.<sup>23</sup> “Slave of the God” was probably religious functionary and not a slave in the traditional sense. Priests appear to also have had access to state land. So we operate under the assumption that the priestly class met the minimum requirement to qualify for middle class – they are autonomous. But what about the limiting requirement, do they work for a living? It would seem not, as the Linear B tablets denote often how priests receive gifts from the Mycenaean palaces.

It is at this juncture we reach one of the more frustrating aspects of Bronze Age Archaeology; when all is said and done relatively little is known about how Mycenaean society functioned. While it appears the priestly caste was of higher rank, what was their relationship to political authority? Did religious authority equal political authority, or was one subordinate to the other?

There is ample evidence for a religious presence in the Mycenaean palaces. It is suggested the prominent placement of the hearth in the megaron at Mycenae is an homage to

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<sup>23</sup> Ventris, Michael, John Chadwick, and A. J. B. Wace. *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.) 124.

Hestia, Goddess of the Hearth,<sup>24</sup> though this is a tenuous connection because Hestia is not attested in Linear B.<sup>25</sup> The connection is better seen at Pylos, where frescoes from the megaron depict libations and sacrifices.<sup>26</sup> But as for what role the Slaves of the God played in any of these political rituals is as yet unknown. Furthermore, the term “Slave of the God” seems to be a distinctly less prestigious position than priest, based on land allocation. As such, at most it is able to be said that religious figures must have occupied a special place in society, however the true extent of their influence and position are as yet unknown.

Under our definition, middle class is a catch-all category. It is an artificial description of a group which spans from rich merchants to poor peasant folk, whose lives and desires scarcely resembled one another. The poor independent farmer living in the sticks of Argos probably has nothing in common with the Oil Merchant, yet they are grouped into the same kind of people. So the middle class needs to be further defined. The upper middle class will be loosely defined as the Bronze Age analog of the bourgeoisie, rich merchants and traders like the Oil Merchant. The lower middle class will encompass agricultural occupations such as subsistence farmers and slightly more well-to-do farmers who sell a small amount of surplus.

### *The Middle Class in Mycenaean Society: Economic Evidence*

At last we return to the original question – did such a class of people exist in Mycenaean society? More to the point, can we prove such a people existed based on the sources we have? The alternative view would be that the Bronze Age was society so stratified, so agrarian based, that everyone fell into the category of either slave or royalty. This may seem like an implausible

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<sup>24</sup> Shelmerdine, Cynthia, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008): 353.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 353.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 353.



concept to a society as nuanced as our own, but it is not so far-fetched for the ancient world. Mycenae's system of centralized distribution institutionalized an extreme hierarchy, and "in hierarchical societies inequality is generally normalized."<sup>27</sup> To find the middle class, we will consider our two classes of evidence, economic and archaeological, in turn.

Class complexity arises with economic complexity; therefore to examine class one must examine economics. It is often thought that with such an imposing physical structure, enormous staff, and extensive economic record that the palace assumed complete control over the economics of the society which it ruled. This view is simple enough to develop a working understanding of Mycenaean culture, but must be nuanced in order to look closer at class divisions. The palaces certainly had their hand in almost every industry, but the level of control they had varied, and in these pockets of variation sprung an opportunity for a middle class to form.

Some industries were vertically integrated; the palaces controlled every aspect of production from start to finish, even if it was not all at the palace site. The best example of this is the production of textiles on Knossos. Sheep flocks were kept at various locations around Crete, and precise records were kept on the sex and status of over 100,000 sheep.<sup>28</sup> Wool was then collected and brought to palace centers, where it was allotted to different workers to produce different types of textiles. Nearly 1,000 women worked in the textile industry at Knossos,<sup>29</sup> who have formally been dubbed "palace-dependent" but were likely slaves. The finished products and their final destinations were noted in palace records.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah B., Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer T. Roberts. *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 41.

<sup>28</sup> Shelmerdine, Cynthia, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 304.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* 305.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* 305.

Despite the geographically wide nature of the wool industry at Knossos each step along the way was controlled by the palace. The sheep were kept in direct control of the local center, palace-hired officials known as “collectors” monitored the flocks. Final textile production was carried out by palace slaves, and production was tabulated in palace records. All participants belong either to the lower class who act as producers or the upper class who act as distributors. There was no niche for independent producers in this market and therefore no way for a middle class to rise.

On the other hand, opportunities for middle class growth appeared in industries that were not so carefully controlled. Pottery is an example of an industry which functioned largely independently of the palace economy. There are no detailed descriptions of the collection of clay and the individual production of pottery vessels. This is not to say that palaces did not need or use pottery. On the contrary, it seems Pylos needed up to 12,000 pithoi per year.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the palace acquired this vast amount of pottery from independent producers whose level of production was incredible. Based on the evidence, it would seem that Pylos bought all of its 12,000 pithoi from a mere one to four independent pottery workshops!<sup>32</sup>

These one to four workshops, who based on their service have the honor of being entitled “Royal Potters”, had what may have been one of the earliest examples of a government contract. The fact that they satisfy our two requirements for middle class, they are both free and work for their living, make them excellent examples of how the middle class fits into the highly regulated Mycenaean economy. By occupying the niche for production everyday goods, these craftsmen could rise in wealth and status despite the hierarchical society and regularized economy.

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<sup>31</sup> Bennet, John. "The Aegean Bronze Age." *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.) 199.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* 199.

As an aside, one might wonder why the palace cared so deeply about textile production yet seemed to care not at all about pottery. Everyone from every walk of life needed pottery in some fashion, so the skills to make it must have been fairly widespread. On the other hand, textiles were a luxury good. While there may have been some market for it in Mycenaean Greece, its primary purpose was to be exported. The non-perishable nature of many luxury goods made them ideal for export, and Mycenaean Greece found a rich market for these goods in other parts of the Aegean. Other closely controlled luxury industries included the production of perfumed oil,<sup>33</sup> blue glass,<sup>34</sup> and ivory.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most complicated systems in Mycenaean economics was land tenure, and likewise it is difficult to see where the middle class might fit. The best land was held by the *wanax* and the *lawagetas*, the king and military leader respectively. Following them come three high ranking officials known as *telestai*, of which a group of three held as much land as the *lawagetas*.<sup>36</sup> Beyond that, much of the evidence is based on the evidence specifically at Pylos.<sup>37</sup> Some land appears to belong to the *damo*, the local community, who may have paid taxes on it.<sup>38</sup> Other land might be leased to specific individuals, which is where we see the middle class appear. Many of these people were cult officials or servants thereof, but some of these individuals were craftsman who did services for the state. Namely, our potter with the government contract!<sup>39</sup> So the system of land tenure might be an important path to wealth for rising middle class members. An important caveat to this system was that land was largely

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 200.

<sup>34</sup> Shelmerdine, Cynthia, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 296.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid* 296.

<sup>36</sup> Ventris, Michael, John Chadwick, and A. J. B. Wace. *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.) 120-121.

<sup>37</sup> Bennet, John. "The Aegean Bronze Age." *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 193.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid* 193.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid* 194.

leased, as such one could not pass on land wealth to one's children. While you yourself might reach middle class status, there is no guaranteeing your children will not slide backwards into the lower classes.

This is another moment where cultural analogy can be brought into play. The system of land tenure in the Mycenaean period is remarkably similar to that of the manorial system of Medieval Europe. The best land was held exclusively by the Lord of the Manor (wanax), common land was held by the village and taxed (damo), and allodial land was brought into cultivation from waste and was free from taxes.<sup>40</sup> The latter of which can loosely be compared to land awarded in return for service. More importantly, the additional similarity between the two cultures cements the notion that Medieval European class divisions, which included a small middle class, can be adapted to Mycenae.

An important stage for the growth of class divisions was in urban centers. While the cities of today and the cities of the ancient world are wildly different, they share certain fundamental truths. People in cities do not produce their own food and goods, ergo they need services. And since we are excluding the possibility of a perfect communist society, they have to buy it from someone. Unfortunately so far we have not found any archaeological evidence for a Stop & Shop at Mycenae, but there is an interesting example at the site of Troy of a similar kind.

House 700 is found at Troy just inside the south gate. It arose during the generation of Troy when houses were packed in close to the walls, implying a time of conflict, which some might argue was the Trojan War. While House 700 is badly preserved, a significant amount of domestic items were recovered. Among them are vases, saucers, animal bones, and a great deal of other kinds of pottery. These are domestic destruction layer regulars, but also appearing are

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<sup>40</sup> Hutchinson, J. S. "Mycenaean Kingdoms and Medieval Estates (An Analogical Approach to the History of LH III)." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 26.1 (1977): 15.

storage bins containing wheat, a flour mill, a sink, and ovens, which are rarer.<sup>41</sup> While this could just be the method of producing bread for the household, when combined with its proximity to the gate and the unusual nature of the finds “it is perhaps not drawing too much on the imagination to recognize here a small bakeshop, just inside the main gateway of the citadel, where bread and wine and possibly a few other staples may have been dispensed to passing travelers.”<sup>42</sup>

It’s a bakery! This implies that there must have been a baker. The presence of a baker also meant that there were assistants, perhaps the members of his or her family, or even hired employees. Here we have the entire makings of an industry. Since all cities needed such basic goods, it is not unreasonable to think that a group of bakers and other service providers found an opportunity to take advantage of urban growth and achieve middle class status.

### *The Middle Class in Mycenaean Society: Archaeological Evidence*

Though the stratification of society and evidence of a middle class is not abundantly clear in the economics of the Bronze Age, close examination of the evidence reveals a definitive middle class presence. The archaeological record can also shed light on class structure. We have already seen the power of archaeology when considering the House of the Oil Merchant and House 700, which are both excellent anecdotal examples of the middle class. However to find widespread evidence of a middle class one must look more broadly. Tombs and unwalled settlements are both excellent places to look for the middle class.

Tholos tombs, along with the palaces, enjoy considerable status and attention in Bronze Age archaeology. Like the upper class, they are easily seen and therefore easily studied. Only

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<sup>41</sup> Blegen, Carl, Cedric G. Boulter, John L. Casky, and Marion Rawson. *Troy: University of Cincinnati Excavations at the Troad*. Vol. 4. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1958) 66.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* 66.

members of the societal elite had the wealth and authority to mobilize the construction of such a large project. However, the middle class buried their dead too, and while they could not match the grandeur of tholos tombs they left impressive structures of their own behind, known now as chamber tombs.



*Figure 3 – The Treasury of Atreus, an example of a tholos tomb.*

Chamber tombs are highly simplified versions of tholoi. Rather than built out of rock they are cut out of rock. This method of building limits the use of chamber tombs to regions which had an appropriate geological make-up, where softer rock was present beneath a layer of harder rock.<sup>43</sup> Their entrance path, or dromos, is typically much shorter than those of the tholoi. Chamber tombs often include multiple burials, typically this has been assumed to show family

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<sup>43</sup> Rutter, Jeremy. "The Prehistoric Archaeology of the Aegean." *The Prehistoric Archaeology of the Aegean*. Dartmouth College, 26 June 1997. Web. 11 Dec. 2009.

burials however “there is no particularly strong evidence for their having been designed to hold the members of a family as opposed to some other form of social group.”<sup>44</sup>

The chamber tomb seems to have been first adopted during the period of great transition and upheaval at the beginning of the Mycenaean Palatial Period.<sup>45</sup> Over the course of the Mycenaean period they became specifically associated with lower classes who sought to emulate upper class burial practice.<sup>46</sup> Chamber tombs are extremely prevalent and vary immensely, from large tombs with extremely rich offerings to relatively poor ones. There are over 250 located at the site of Mycenae alone, with several hundred more scattered across the Mycenaean world.<sup>47</sup> These are in short the final resting places of the Mycenaean middle class. People who were rich enough to bury their loved ones in relatively luxury, but were not so rich or politically connected that they could bury them in the tholoi of their upper class neighbors.

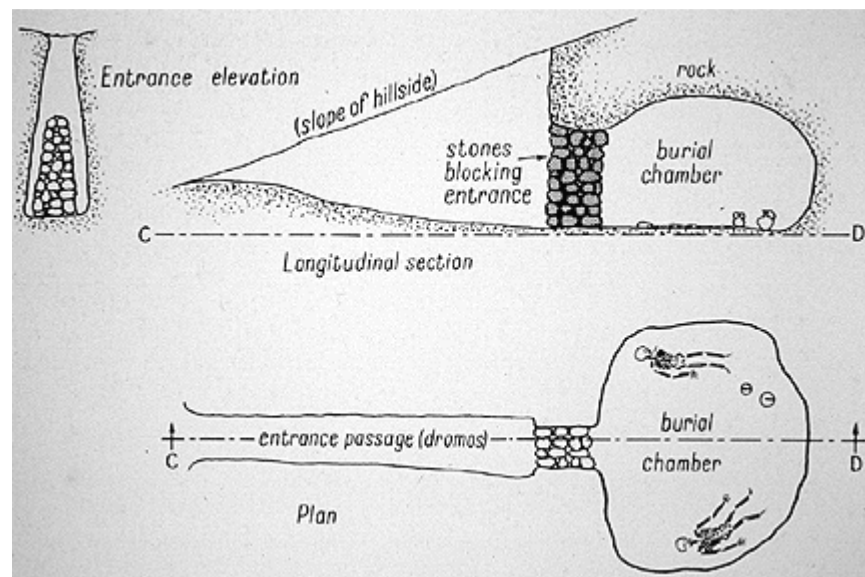


Figure 4 – Layout of a Chamber Tomb

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

<sup>45</sup> Shelmerdine, Cynthia, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 331.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid* 331.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* 336.

Tholos tombs are renowned for the richness of the finds within them. While chamber tombs generally contain more modest finds, they are still no small monument to the dead. In an Early Late Helladic chamber tomb built in Argos, a wide array of pottery, bronze goods, ivory goods, obsidian tools, and other small finds were found.<sup>48</sup> While like most chamber tombs it contains multiple burials, what seems to be the primary burial was laid out with pomp and circumstance. The body lies in the center of the floor along a north-south axis, one arm touching his belly and the other raised to his face.<sup>49</sup>

The relative modesty of the finds, and the care with which the body was laid out, is evidence for a kind of people who are well-to-do but certainly not extraordinarily rich. This is a group of people who are attempting to emulate the wealth and splendor of the upper class tholos tombs in their personal burials, both architecturally and materially. What we have here is proof of an upper middle class burial!

The other major archaeological evidence for a middle class is their architecture. Nearly all the Mycenaean citadels, including Troy, had a correlating unwalled settlement that went with it. The presence of these settlements outside the walls speaks volumes about class divisions in the Mycenaean world. Living within the extra protection of the walls was an indication of high status, reserved for the ruling elite and the upper echelons of the middle class such as the Oil Merchant. Living outside of the walls meant less protection and less status, though one assumes in a time of danger they would move within the walls. Beyond this cursory analysis, little can be said about the evidence for middle class in these settlements due to a lack of published archaeological evidence, though ongoing excavations are occurring. Much of the archaeology of

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<sup>48</sup> Papadimitriou, Nikolas, and K. Shelton. "An Early LH Built Chamber Tomb from Argos." *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 96 (2001): 51.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid* 47.



this period has focused on the palaces and other wealthy architecture, and a broader idea of how the middle class lived would be achieved by increased study of these unfortified settlements.

Another understudied archaeological area is the study of rural settlements. A huge amount of attention has been paid to the palaces, leaving rural centers largely unstudied. But they do exist, in the Knossos tablets 100 rural centers are named, while 37 are named at Pylos.<sup>50</sup> Future archaeological study on these sites could illuminate the life of the rural middle class.

### *Class Continuation with Classical Greece*

Despite its relative obscurity, we see there is reasonable economic and archaeological evidence for the existence of a middle class. As a postscript to this argument, let us now consider the continuity of class complexity between Mycenaean and Archaic Greece. We have shown there is a middle class in the Mycenaean period. There is ample evidence for a middle class in the Archaic period, since much of the driving force in Athenian politics was the constant struggle of the middle class to uproot the power of the aristocracy and gain political enfranchisement. So was class complexity preserved through this period, or did it disappear and then reappear?

The Mycenaean period ended with a huge collapse, precipitating what is (perhaps rudely) dubbed the Dark Age of Greece. Literacy, culture, and all sense of grandeur from the Mycenaean period was lost, along with most of our ability to see said society. Here again we must turn to our problematic source, Homer. Homer offers us scarcely any evidence at all of a middle class. Nearly every character falls into the category of upper class ruler or servant. The closest we get to a vision of an upper middle class is the suitors at Ithaca, who are seeking to rise up in society by marrying Penelope. However, they do not meet our requirement of working for a living and

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<sup>50</sup> Bennet, John. "Outside in the Distance: Problems in Understanding the Economic Geography of Mycenaean Palatial Territories." *Texts, Tablets, and Scribes: Studies in Mycenaean Epigraphy and Economy*. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca 22.

so are more rightly categorized with the upper class. The best model for the presence of a lower middle class is the hordes of Achaeans at Troy. These largely faceless masses are the closest we get to a group of people who are both free but clearly middle class.

Our next source for the presence of a middle class in Greek society is Hesiod, who was writing during the eighth century BC at about the same time as Homer, just at the tail end of the Dark Age and the beginning of the Archaic period. While Homer may get more poetic drama out of a single line in the *Iliad* than Hesiod does in the entire *Theogony*, his *Works and Days* offers us precious insight into the middle class of the late Dark Age into the early Archaic period. Along with considerable complaining about his brother, he directs extremely passive aggressive fables at local rulers.

And now I will tell a fable for princes who themselves understand. Thus said the hawk to the nightingale with speckled neck, while he carried her high up among the clouds, gripped fast in his talons, and she, pierced by his crooked talons, cried pitifully. To her he spoke disdainfully: `Miserable thing, why do you cry out? One far stronger than you now holds you fast, and you must go wherever I take you, songstress as you are.<sup>51</sup>

He hopefully notes on the other hand that “they who give straight judgments to strangers and to the men of the land, and go not aside from what is just, their city flourishes, and the people prosper in it.”<sup>52</sup>

The world that Hesiod is painting for us is undeniably one of middle class grief. He is living in a world where the middle class has no political power and is at the mercy of local rulers. Hesiod does not see a way out of this predicament, as the ruling elites are far stronger than he is. He can only hope that the rule of law will be just. This sentiment is shared by the middle class in

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<sup>51</sup> Hesiod. *Works and Days*. Trans. Hugh G-Evelyn White Lines 202-211.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid* Lines 225-237.

many different societies throughout history, and has been taken for evidence of a growing middle class in Hesiod's time.

After Hesiod came two of the most important events in Greek history, colonization of the Mediterranean by the Greeks and the hoplite revolution. A huge population boom in the Greek world generating the creation of many new settlements, with new opportunities for the middle class to flourish in each. Whereas the middle class in Mycenaean times was small, occupying several specialized niches, colonization drove the creation of a large and dynamic middle class. Meanwhile, the hoplite revolution not only fundamentally changed Greek warfare, but it was pivotal in the rise of the middle class as an important social force. First, the phalanx emphasized unity above all, blurring the boundaries between noble and middle class. Second, the phalanx required a citizen-army which was well off enough to both arm itself and to leave the farm at a moment's notice.<sup>53</sup> The middle class it produced was not content to continue to be dominated by the upper class.

Based on this timeline, it seems that class complexity was not continuous from Mycenae to the historical period. As discussed earlier, class complexity arises from economic complexity. When the Mycenaean economy collapsed, its social structure collapsed with it. This explains why we find that the middle class was largely absent in Homer, there was simply no avenue to middle class wealth during the Dark Age. With the recovery of Greek society and increased economic activity, class complexity began to reemerge, and we see hints of that in Hesiod. Finally, with the emergence of archaic Greek society a middle class emerged that was markedly different from its Mycenaean forbears. Whereas the former was a small group of the population,

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<sup>53</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah B., Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer T. Roberts. *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 122.

defined by those who found an economic niche outside of slavery, the hoplite revolution necessitated the development of a middle class which could both support itself and arm itself.

### *Conclusion*

Despite the deficiency of the sources, there is both clear economic and archaeological evidence middle class presence in Mycenaean society. The middle class arose within markets that were not explicitly controlled by the palace, and they left significant archaeological evidence behind in the form of chamber tombs. The middle class seems to have largely been destroyed by the Mycenaean collapse, and reemerged during the Archaic and Classical period, discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2 – CLASSICAL GREECE: OLYNTHUS

The fall of the Mycenaean palaces precipitated four hundred years of the so called “Dark Age” in Greek history, where Greek society lost all monumental building and literacy. When Greek society emerged, it was a different society than its Mycenaean predecessor. During the 8<sup>th</sup> century instead of palace states, poleis began to emerge from Sicily to the west coast of Turkey. This study will now turn to the analysis of the middle class in this new society, specifically the middle class at Olynthus during the Classical Period.

### *Rationale for Choice of Olynthus and Background of the Site*

It may be surprising that a paper focusing on the economy of Classical Greece chose Olynthus as a type site. Olynthus is located in the Chalcidice peninsula in northern Greece, which was very much on the edge of the Greek world, whereas there are other city-states far more emblematic of Greek culture such as Athens and Sparta.



Figure 5 – Map of the Chalcidice. Olynthus is shown in red. A schematic showing the location of the peninsula in Greece is shown in the upper right hand corner.

Olynthus was chosen as a type site because the archaeological evidence for domestic architecture at Olynthus is vastly superior than that of Athens or Sparta. The site of Sparta is highly underwhelming considering their cultural importance. Of Sparta, Thucydides wrote

For I suppose that if Sparta were to become desolate, and only the temples and the foundations of the public buildings were left, that as time went on there would be a strong disposition with posterity to refuse to accept her fame as a true exponent of her power. And yet they occupy two-fifths of the Peloponnesus and lead the whole, not to speak of their numerous allies outside. Still, as the city is neither built in a compact form nor adorned with magnificent temples and public edifices, but composed of villages after the old fashion of Hellas, there would be an impression of inadequacy.<sup>54</sup>

As such, Sparta leaves little archaeological evidence which can be analyzed for class relationships.

<sup>54</sup> Thucydides, Robert B. Strassler, and Richard Crawley. *The Landmark Thucydides: a Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. New York: Free, 1996. Print.

Athens fares better in terms of archaeological remains. Images of its splendid monuments are known throughout the world, though Thucydides notes “if Athens were to suffer the same misfortune [as Sparta, and become desolate], I suppose that any inference from the appearance presented to the eye would make her power to have been twice as great as it is.”<sup>55</sup> However, this study seeks to analyze not monumental architecture but that of the middle class, which rarely is as well preserved or studied. In addition, Athens has been continuously inhabited since ancient times and has survived several dozen destructions, thus there are a variety of versions of Athens lying on top of one another. This obscures and confuses the archaeology, making it difficult to understand the economic situation of a particular point in time.

On the other hand, Olynthus has excellent material remains. The city was inhabited for a relatively short period of time, then destroyed and never reoccupied. It was meticulously excavated from 1928 to 1938, leading to the publication of over fifty houses which span a range of economic classes.<sup>56</sup> The excavator of Olynthus, David Robinson, noted that Olynthus would assume “a dominating position for the study of domestic architecture in this period,”<sup>57</sup> a conjecture which turned out to be thoroughly correct. Olynthus’s superior material evidence makes it the ideal choice in which to analyze class through archaeology.

Olynthus is located in the Chalcidice, at the crux of the western and central finger. The city is built on two hills which rise some thirty meters above the surroundings. The original settlement occupied only the northern hill, after which a planned extension of the city arose on the southern hill.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Nevett, Lisa C. *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 54.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid* 54.

<sup>58</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 23.

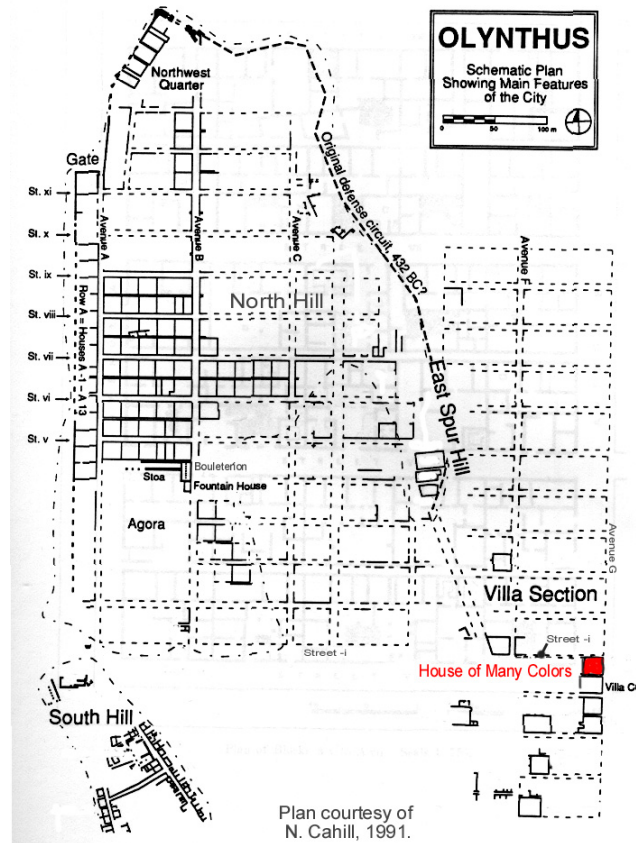


Figure 6 – Map of Olynthus

The city went through several distinct phases. The first phase stretches from the site's initial settlement to the Peloponnesian War. While it appears that Olynthus and the area around it was inhabited from the Neolithic Period on,<sup>59</sup> its earliest beginnings are somewhat unclear. Herodotus wrote that an earlier group of people known as the Bottiaians originally inhabited the site. During the Persian retreat from Greece, the Persian general Artabazos believed that the Bottiaians had supported the revolt against Xerxes and sacked the city. "Then he [Artabazos] handed their city over to Kritoboulos of Torone to be its governor, and to the people of

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* 34.



Chalcidian descent; so it was in that way that the Chalcidians gained possession of Olynthus.”<sup>60</sup>

There however remained some continuing Bottiaian presence, as evidenced by the discovery of Bottiaian coinage found on the South Hill.<sup>61</sup>

From this, we can surmise that unlike many Greek cities Olynthus did not begin as a colony of another city; rather it was an opportunistic action by a rival group of people during the Persian war. The lack of ties to other Greek cities might help illuminate Olynthus’s actions during the Peloponnesian War, where Olynthus acted in its own singular interest.

While the exact date which Olynthus joined the Delian League is unknown, it is presumed that it did so shortly following the end of the Persian Wars. Olynthus remained a relatively unimportant city until the Peloponnesian War, evidenced by the fact it paid the relatively small amount of two talents of tribute yearly to Athens.<sup>62</sup> It became a major player when the people of the Chalcidice rebelled against the Athenian Empire in 432 BC.<sup>63</sup> This precipitated a migration of surrounding populations into the city of Olynthus, known as the *anoikismos*. Because of the *anoikismos*, Olynthus became the predominant power in the region and named the head of the Chalcidic League, a rival to the Athenian Delian League.

As noted, prior to the *anoikismos* Olynthus was not a particularly large city. The choice of Olynthus for the center of the Chalcidic League was probably due to the city’s defensible nature, since Olynthus was a fortified community on a hill. While this was an intelligent military decision, it led to a housing crisis inside the city. The population of the city could easily have tripled, perhaps more, based on the tributes paid to Athens by the populations which

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<sup>60</sup> Herodotus, Robert B. Strassler, and Andrea L. Purvis. *The Landmark Herodotus: the Histories*. New York: Pantheon, 2007. Print.

<sup>61</sup> "Olynthus." *Perseus*. Tufts. Web.

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Olynthus&object=Site&redirect=true>>.

<sup>62</sup><sup>62</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 37.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid* 24.

subsequently moved to Olynthus.<sup>64</sup> This probably led to the construction of the planned section of the city on the North Hill;<sup>65</sup> this is theory is supported by the fact that there is no evidence of settlement outside the South Hill of Olynthus before 432 BC.<sup>66</sup> Most of the archaeological evidence which will be discussed comes from the planned city on the North Hill.

After the end of the Peloponnesian war, Olynthus came into conflict with the new growing power in the region: Macedon. The city was captured by Philip of Macedon in 348 BC. The men of the city were killed while the women and children were sold into slavery, and the city was essentially abandoned from then on.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the tragic fate of its inhabitants, modern archaeologists and historians are strangely fortunate in Olynthus's abrupt collapse. Olynthus was a planned city that was occupied for less than three generations after the anoikismos then abandoned. This left hundreds of preserved houses with tens of thousands of artifacts approximately how they were in 348 BC.<sup>68</sup> Olynthus gives us a snapshot of economy from the classical age of Greece through this abrupt destruction, as many of the preserved houses offer ample evidence of economic activity and manufacturing occupations.<sup>69</sup>

Before proceeding, there are several important archaeological points to make about the nature of the destruction of the city. While it is true that we have received a wealth of household information, the houses may not appear exactly as they might have when they were inhabited. Items likely were moved around in the course of day to day activity. Furthermore Olynthus was not simply abandoned, it was sacked. A long siege precluded its eventual destruction, which

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid* 37.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid* 37.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid* 38.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid* 24.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid* vii.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid* 24.

probably led to significant concentrating of certain goods (such as food) whereas agricultural equipment may have been discarded. Once the city was taken, a certain amount of destruction must have taken place, though it seems that Olynthus was not completely destroyed and dismantled by the invading Macedonians.<sup>70</sup> Thus, many of the conclusions drawn from archaeology should be taken as reasonable approximates of how society in Olynthus worked, not as solid fact.

### *Class and Economy in Ancient Greece*

Before moving on to analyze the nature of economy and class specifically at Olynthus, let us turn for a moment to discuss these concepts in a broader context throughout the Greek world. The first thing to note is that Classical Greece was extremely diverse and varied. Each *polis* had its own distinct culture, and the average person living in Greece at this time did not think of themselves as “Greek” but “Athenian” or “Spartan.” Thus while some generalizations about economic activity can be made across the Greek world, class can vary dramatically from polis to polis.

The nature of the Greek economy remains controversial. There are several problems which arise in interpreting the present evidence. First, the surviving evidence of how economy and society worked in classical Greece is heavily skewed towards Athens.<sup>71</sup> Second, much of the evidence on the Greek economy is based on speeches, which present an inherently utopian view of Greek life; or on legal cases which often deal solely with the upper classes.<sup>72</sup> These written

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<sup>70</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 58.

<sup>71</sup> Davies, John K. "Classical Greece: Production." *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. Ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Richard Saller. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2007.) 333.

<sup>72</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 24-25.

works can hardly present us with a full and accurate picture of economics, highlighting the necessity for archaeological supplementation.

However, there are certain conclusions which can be drawn about the overall nature of the Greek economy. There is no denying that ancient Greece was a primarily agrarian society. Even in Athens, which was the most complex of all the poleis in terms of economy based on epigraphic evidence, most people did not live in the city itself.<sup>73</sup> While this practice may have begun as simply subsistence farming, by the Classical period it is clear that a significant amount of farming was also for profit. For example, the Greek countryside was most heavily used during the 4<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>74</sup> a feature which was concurrent with an overall increase in the standard of living across all of Greece,<sup>75</sup> indicating that the increased farming was contributing to the greater comfort enjoyed by the Greeks.

Agrarian societies are often static and support extremes in class division. However, such a view of Classical Greek society would be an oversimplification. First of all, as mentioned above some farming was carried out for profit, which would disrupt the feudal model which purely subsistence farming often creates. For example, the overall housing situation at Olynthus improved dramatically over the 4<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>76</sup> indicating at least a reasonable amount of economic growth throughout the Greek world. Second, not all money coming into Greece was through farming. A considerable amount of trade was also carried out by sea with neighboring poleis and non-Greek communities. Finally, while the financial markets were hardly as complex as they are today, there was a reasonable amount of money-lending going on, particularly in

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<sup>73</sup>Oliver, G. J. "The Economic Realities." *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*. Ed. Konrad H. Kinzl. Malden, (MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006) 285.

<sup>74</sup>*ibid* 285.

<sup>75</sup>Manning, Joseph Gilbert and Ian Morris. *The Ancient Economy: Evidence and Models*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005) 123.

<sup>76</sup>*ibid* 108.

Athens.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the economy of the Classical Greek world was complex enough such that enterprising individuals could find alternative avenues to wealth, indicating that the existence of a middle class was at least possible.

While there certainly was the potential for a middle class, there was hardly a uniform standard of what constituted middle class from poleis to poleis. For example, Sparta had a rigorously divided society between full Spartan citizens, slaves, and perioikoi. In this divide, the perioikoi could almost certainly be considered the middle class, as they were not subject to the shameful life of the Spartan helots but nor did they enjoy the benefits of full Spartan citizens. In Athens by the classical period, ostensibly the democracy eliminated many class divides. However, old habits die hard and frequently there were still upper class hold outs, such as the court of the Areopagus, which had to be systematically modified over time. Even after the supposed elimination of major class divisions, certain families such as the Alcmaeonids continued to have significant power.

Unfortunately, this study is not long enough to analyze the economics and class relationships in every polis. Therefore, I will now turn to defining class boundaries specifically in Olynthus, which provides considerable archaeological evidence for it.

### *Class Boundaries in Olynthian Society*

In order to determine whether a middle class existed in Olynthus, we first must define exactly what the middle class was so we know what to look for. Unfortunately, Olynthus presents us with little written evidence, so we cannot turn to the words of Olynthian citizens to

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<sup>77</sup> Oliver, G. J. "The Economic Realities." *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*. Ed. Konrad H. Kinzl. Malden, (MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006) 282.

help us define what they thought of as middle class. However, we can make some reasonable conjectures based on archaeological evidence and broader evidence from the Greek world.

Let us turn first to the lower classes. First of all, it is almost certainly true that the Olynthians had slaves. Every known city from the classical Greek world had slaves, though admittedly in varying numbers. Sparta, for instance, had more slaves than citizens. There is no reason to assume that Olynthus was any different in this regard. Unfortunately slaves tend to be a relatively invisible group of people, as they did not own independent dwellings, so we cannot make any estimates on how many slaves lived in Olynthus.

The next category of lower class is the free homeless. Once again, this is a fairly invisible group. We know they must have existed; the single greatest creator of homeless populations is natural disaster and Greece is to this day plentiful in earthquakes.<sup>78</sup> Both Thucydides and Plutarch describe the displaced homeless of Attica during the Peloponnesian War who took shelter within the walls of Athens.<sup>79</sup> It is possible that the group known as the thetes, or poor day laborers, may have belonged to this category. Thetes were considered among the lowest of the low in Greek society because they were not part of an *oikos*, a Greek home system, which meant that not only would they be unmourned after their death and their line would be abandoned. They quite literally had no place to live. Some have also argued that prostitutes should be included in the category of “homeless”, as they existed entirely outside of respectable Greek society. If one accepts this view, brothels double not only as places of business but also homeless shelters.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, free landowning poor. The free poor are distinguished from slaves because they are free, and from the homeless and thetes because they own land. Their existence is well

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<sup>78</sup> Ault, Bradley A., and Lisa C. Nevett. *Ancient Greek Houses and Households: Chronological, Regional, and Social Diversity*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005) 146.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid* 146.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid* 150.

documented throughout Greece, in particular they surface as rowers in the Athenian navy.<sup>81</sup>

What distinguishes a member of the free landowning poor from the land-owning middle class is that fuzzy category known as luxury. Such people did not live a particularly comfortable existence. Pseudo-Dicaearchus writes of their Athenian dwellings “Most of the houses are mean, the nice ones few. A stranger would doubt, on seeing it first, if this were really the renowned city of the Athenians.”<sup>82</sup> This is admittedly a fuzzy distinction. At what point does one live comfortably enough to exceed being “free poor”? Unfortunately, without detailed data on average incomes and living standards, this is an almost impossible distinction to define.

Together, these three groups comprise what the lower classes in Classical Greece. They are marked as such either because they are not free, or they are free but live in poverty. Both money and freedom are necessary to attain middle class status.

It should be noted that the hierarchy between these three groups occasionally becomes confused. One might assume, given our modern perceptions of slavery, that the slaves occupied the absolute lowest echelon of society. This was not necessarily true in the Greek world because slaves belonged to the *oikos*, the Greek household, and therefore were superior to landless poor. Prostitutes in particular were excluded from any and all family life,<sup>83</sup> placing them below the lowest household slave.

Another easily defined group are the immigrants who came to Olynthus during the anoikismos, but their class status is somewhat unclear. Olynthus became the center of the new Chalcidic state, but it is unknown if this occurred simultaneously with the anoikismos.<sup>84</sup> So did the newcomers become immediate citizens of Olynthus? Or did they retain the citizenship of

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid* 141.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid* 141.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid* 155.

<sup>84</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 42.

their original homes? And once the Chalcidic League was formed, how did that change? And if they became citizens, were they less well off than the original inhabitants due to the fact that they immigrated?

It seems that once the Chalcidic league was formed, the various cities within the league agreed to share common laws, citizenship, and marriage rights.<sup>85</sup> It also appears unlikely, given the degree of construction at Olynthus, that newly arrived immigrants would commit to such construction if they did not believe they had a future in Olynthus.<sup>86</sup> Finally, once the League was up and running they enjoyed equal rights with the original inhabitants, so if initially new migrants were second class citizens such a stigma was ostensibly erased by the creation of the League. Without specific data pointing to new citizens living in less comfortable conditions, it cannot be concluded there was any class stigma associated with immigrating to Olynthus.

As always, the line between middle and upper class is considerably blurrier, particularly in Olynthus's case. We have no records of specific families that were traditionally associated with upper class functions, such as leadership or religious authority. It is conceivable, given Olynthus's short history, that such families may never have risen to the same prominence that they did in other city states such as Athens.

Therefore to define the barrier between upper and middle class at Olynthus, I will use a distinction which I feel is a frequent divide between middle class and upper class throughout history; the necessity to work for one's living. This is supported by the literary evidence from the Greek world. Much of the literature of the Greek world which survives to us reflects the opinions and attitudes of the landed aristocracy, and we find slights made upon those who work for their living throughout it. Such works claim that craftsmen and traders were socially marginalized,

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid* 42.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid* 44.



and agricultural workers could not hold office.<sup>87</sup> For example, Euripides' mother was given a hard time for being a vegetable seller, while at Thebes according to Aristotle no man who had been on the farm and hence away from public life for ten years could be permitted to hold public office.<sup>88</sup>

Interestingly, archaeology does not support these assertions. Agriculture formed the backbone of Greek society and the overwhelming majority of the population lived on farms. The citizen farmer formed the bulk of the Greek army after the hoplite revolution, and it was these citizen farmers that defended Greece from the incurring Persians. Craftsmen and industry within cities played a critical role and such traders seem not to have been geographically ostracized in the city. As such, it is difficult to label such a large and important group as a victim of marginalization.

This is directly supported by archaeology in Olynthus. While there is a wide range of household industry in Olynthus, both of agricultural processing and manufacturing, there is zero isolation of these industries. Such houses exist throughout the city; there is no "Potters District" where all the potters were cornered.<sup>89</sup> The only place where industry is absent is in the "Villa Section" in the east of the city, indicating perhaps some isolated upper class prejudice.<sup>90</sup> However, on the whole industry is spread throughout the city. The absence of marginalization of these industries is evident even in the houses themselves. Household economic activities are not restricted to a certain area of the house, but are integrated throughout the house and merge with public areas. Household industries are often found in the courtyard, or in workshops which are

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<sup>87</sup> Ault, Bradley A., and Lisa C. Nevett. *Ancient Greek Houses and Households: Chronological, Regional, and Social Diversity*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005) 54.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid* 54.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid* 59.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid* 59.

open to and adjoin the rest of the house.<sup>91</sup> For example, an olive crusher house's stored their olive crushing facilities in the center of their courtyard, easily visible to any guests.<sup>92</sup>



*Figure 7 – Courtyard of Olive Crusher's House, with orbis from olive crusher clearly visible in the foreground.*

How do we reconcile these two extremes? The written material of the Greek world suggests that working for one's living indicated lower status, while the archaeology demonstrates no sense of marginalization. I propose that the solution to this apparent paradox is class. Upper class members, who made up the majority of ancient authors, had no need to work for their living and looked down on those who did. It was a fundamental divider between the middle class and the rich. The fact that there is no physical marginalization of these people suggests that the majority of people did not conform to upper class ideals, or at the very least were not bothered

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid* 59.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid* 55.

by them enough to sneer at their neighbors, and I would go so far as to suggest this in itself is evidence of a middle class!

To summarize, the middle class was defined in Olynthus as being free, owning property (usually land), and being relatively well off, but not so rich as one could afford not to work for one's living.

#### *Further Discussion of Class in Olynthus: Real Estate and Social Mobility*

While the wealth of information about class we receive from Olynthus is archaeological, it should be noted that there is a limited amount of written evidence. One kind of evidence which is of particular interest is real estate documents. Various fragments of these deeds have been found throughout the site of Olynthus<sup>93</sup> and there is one complete inscription which is available to us. This complete inscription found carved into limestone in 1928. It was found in a house northeast of the agora. The inscription was badly weathered, but was recoverable and it appears to have been none other than the deed of sale for the house in which it was found.<sup>94</sup>

The inscription describes how Xenon and his father Moschius purchased a house from Euboulides son of Harpaleus which lay between his first house and that of his other neighbor, Philoxenus son of Chabres.<sup>95</sup> There were guarantors, named Pytheas son of Pithion and Philaena daughter of Heron, as well as three witnesses, Pharnabazus, son of Eucles, Philoxenus, son of Chabres, (the aforementioned neighbor) and Mysius, son of Timanthes. It appears that Xenon purchased this house in order to expand his own house into the lot, creating a larger more

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<sup>93</sup> Robinson, David M. "A Deed of Sale at Olynthus." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 59 (1928): 231.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid* 231.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid* 227.

spacious dwelling.<sup>96</sup> The exact price of the house is uncertain due to the poor condition of the inscription, but it appears that the house was paid for in some form of gold currency indicating that the Chalcidean League was minting money.<sup>97</sup>

This sale inscription alone gives us precious insight into the economy of ancient Olynthus. The first thing we should note is the formalized nature of the transaction, the trappings of which are surprisingly similar to modern conventions. This is a legal transaction, with both witnesses and guarantors, and a receipt of the transaction stored in a relevant place. (Namely, inside the house which was sold) The fact that real estate was bought and sold in this fashion indicates a healthy and stable economy.

Second, this inscription gives us a sense of the real estate market in Olynthus. This inscription was found inside a house just northeast of the agora. We know that Xenon probably purchased this house in order to expand his own holdings. It is frustrating however that we know so little about Xenon other than his name. Was he newly come to money? Did he wish to expand his house as a status symbol of his newfound wealth? Or was he already wealthy, and merely wished to live a more luxurious lifestyle? What class was he?

While satisfactory answers to many of these questions simply do not exist, what we do know is that Xenon's purchase indicates a flourishing economy. A flourishing economy frequently contributes to the growth of a middle class. The evidence that Xenon was buying the adjacent house to expand his own is also intriguing, as it suggests that Xenon was perhaps making money and rising up in the world, another important indicator of a growing middle class. Furthermore, there do not appear to have been any social barriers to Xenon's social mobility. All of these factors together suggest a great environment for the growth of a middle class.

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid* 227.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid* 228.

### *Class in Olynthian Architecture*

Most of the houses in Olynthus have a similar foundation plan, known as a “pastas house”.<sup>98</sup> A pastas house is square, with two axes dividing the house east to west which governed the placement of walls, which in turn supported the common roof which ran along the top of each row of houses.<sup>99</sup> Each house was based around a courtyard, located in the southern portion of the house. On the north side of the court is a long portico known as the “pastas”, lending its name to the entire house format.<sup>100</sup> This was the kind of house most loved by Xenophon, explaining how the south facing courtyard kept the house warm in the winter while the roof on the north provided cool in the summer.<sup>101</sup>

Despite the similarity in the floor plan and the deceptively regular grid plan of the city, there was considerable variation in house size. There appear to have been neighborhoods of rich and poor areas, just like in today’s modern cities. For example, houses in the interior of the northern end of the city (not abutting the wall) were of 17 x 17 m dimensions, while the houses immediately next to them which did abut the wall were slightly larger, at 17 x 22 m.<sup>102</sup> Houses in the so-called “Villa Area” were slightly larger than those in other areas. One might notice this variation is not terribly larger, which is likely due to the strict grid plan of the new city. Therefore, the way to get more room in your house was build a second story. Unfortunately, we have little data on these second stories and we do not know how elaborate or spacious they were.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "Olynthus." *Perseus*. Tufts. Web.

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Olynthus&object=Site&redirect=true>>.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

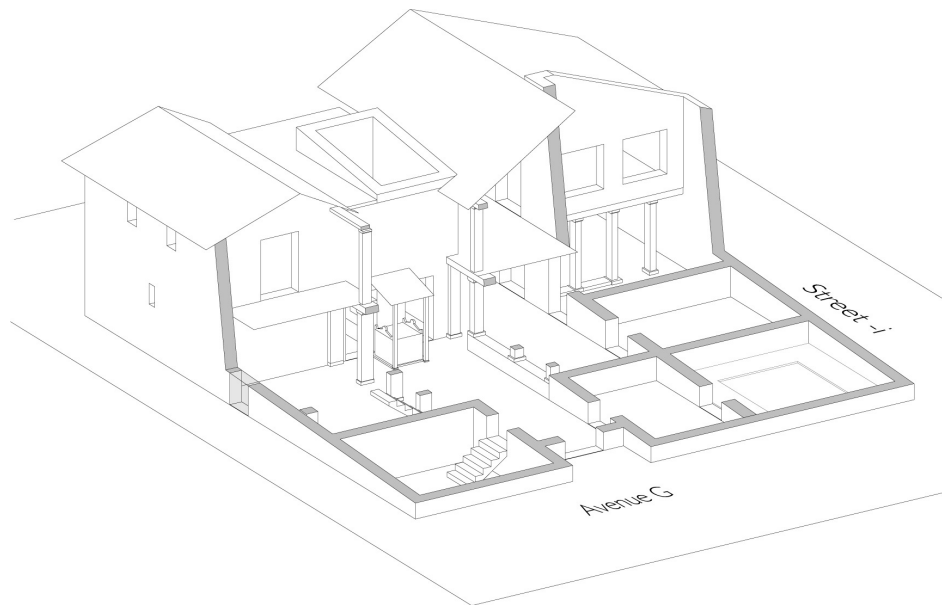
<sup>101</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 75.

<sup>102</sup> Nevett, Lisa C. *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 75.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid* 75.

I will now turn to analyzing two distinct houses which represent two different levels of Olynthian society, namely upper and middle class, in order to demonstrate the presence of the latter. While ideally I would also compare these houses to a “poor” example, there is no house found at Olynthus which seems to obviously suggest itself as being a lower class dwelling. This may be because such a house did not survive, it was not excavated, or it was excavated and there was little interest in it. The houses I am going to talk about here are distinguished from one another on the basis of not only size, but content.

One of the largest and most well known of the houses found at Olynthus was the House of Many Colors. It is so named because few of the rooms inside the house are not painted. The walls of the courtyard are yellow, the pastas is red, even the kitchen was painted blue and red.<sup>104</sup> The house also includes one of the few examples of figural decoration from any house in Olynthus; palmettes are found (though badly preserved) in the andron.<sup>105</sup>



*Figure 8 – Reconstruction of the House of Many Colors*

<sup>104</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 85.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid* 85.

The House was two stories, and rather than having a single kitchen had a group of three rooms which formed a kitchen complex.<sup>106</sup> There is no evidence of any economic activity aside from what is necessary for the house, such as weaving.<sup>107</sup> This suggests the inhabitants were wealthy enough such that they did not need to run a shop, and it has been proposed their primary source of income was agriculturally based.

There are a range of artifacts present in the House. Aside from the usual assortment of storage vessels, there were a variety of glazed plates,<sup>108</sup> bronze decorative bosses (presumably the remains of more elaborate chests),<sup>109</sup> and a wide variety of vases including red figure vases.

There is no doubt that the House of Many Colors must have been the home of upper class citizens of Olynthus. The presence of elaborate interior decoration confirms this, the ability to dispense income on aesthetics as opposed to necessities is a hallmark of upper class status. Furthermore, the fact that there is no evidence of industry within the house suggests these were wealthy landowners, and others worked their land for them. Thus, they were both rich and did not work for their living, reaffirming their upper class status.

As opposed to the elaborate nature of the House of Many Colors, House A 11 is much more modest. While it was larger than most Olynthian houses, it was less organized and less luxurious than most other houses. None of the walls were painted and all the floors were made out of packed earth.<sup>110</sup> There is no evidence there was a kitchen, andron, or any specialized space, instead the house consists of a group of rooms clustered around a courtyard. Unlike the House of Many Colors, none of the walls are painted.

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid* 89.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid* 89.

<sup>108</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 89.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid* 90.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid* 132



Figure 9 – House A11 and adjoining House A 10. House A 11 is represented by the bottom half of the figure.

There are a variety of artifacts found in House A 11. Many of these are associated with economic and household activity, including a looms, storage amphorae, and tableware. There are also some small cult findings; such as a head of Dionysus, a faun's head, and a variety of human terracotta figures. There is also a large cache of metal coins, possibly hoarded by the family during the siege.<sup>111</sup> Overall however, none of these finds are as rich or as elaborate as the ones present in the House of Many Colors.

Despite the fact that House A 11 is rather large, there is a definite economic gap between the residents of A 11 and the residents of the House of Many Colors. There is a notable absence of any wealth and status symbols, such as painting and interior decoration. Clearly the residents

<sup>111</sup> Cahill, Nicholas. *Household and City Organization at Olynthus*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002) 132.



of House A 11 did not have the expendable income necessary to decorate the interior of their space. Their house also lacks elaborate division of space, which is another feature of upper class dwellings. I would argue that House A 11 is a definitively middle class dwelling, due to the absence of the kind of wealth exhibited in the House of Many Colors.

There is an extra piece of interesting information about House A 11; an inscription found in the courtyard indicates the house was used as security on a 2,000 drachma loan.<sup>112</sup> This suggests two things; first that there was at least some money-lending going on in Olynthus. Second it can be interpreted as further evidence of the middle class nature of the inhabitants of the house. Using one's house as security in a loan is a significant gesture since if one cannot pay the loan back one will be evicted. Thus, I would argue that the inhabitants of House A 11 did not have any other significant collateral and were forced to use their home as such, when a member of the upper class might have more land or other assets with which to use as security. This further suggests the people in House A 11 were not fantastically rich, instead they were middle class.

As one final note about the size of the houses at Olynthus, I referenced that House A 11 is above average in terms of size at Olynthus so one might question my assessment that it is a middle class dwelling. House size has been one of the most enduring status symbols throughout history and continues to this day. Thus, it is only natural to assume that such a marker was important in Olynthian society. However, a study has shown that individuals may have owned more than one house, thus size cannot be taken as the ultimate demarcation for wealth.<sup>113</sup> Thus, any understanding of class in Olynthus should not be based solely on house size alone.

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid* 132.

<sup>113</sup> Ault, Bradley A., and Lisa C. Nevett. *Ancient Greek Houses and Households: Chronological, Regional, and Social Diversity*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005) 142.

## *Household Industry*

Aside from differences in wealth and status symbols, there is also evidence for middle class economic activity inside Olynthian houses in the form of household industry. As mentioned before, working for one's living was a defining marker of middle class. A variety of Olynthian houses contained areas which have been identified as shops, either because of the contents found inside of them or the fact that these rooms have no entrances into the rest of the house. Other houses have other evidence for industry inside the house itself. Taken together, all this constitutes working for one's living, and therefore membership in the middle class.

It should be noted that almost all houses engaged in some form of domestic industry. Houses routinely produced their own clothing and food. When the term "household industry" is used, it specifically refers to products produced in the house (whether in a shop format or otherwise) that are intended for sale or out-of-the-house consumption. Of the 100 houses which have been excavated at Olynthus, over a quarter of them have been shown to have some form of household industry.<sup>114</sup>

There was a wide range of household industries present at Olynthus. Some of these industries were common household activities which were enacted on a broader scale for wider consumption. Examples of this include crushing olives, pressing grapes, and grinding grain.<sup>115</sup> The equipment necessary to perform these activities took up a lot of space and therefore represented a significant investment on the part of the household. For example, House a 6 had an olive crusher in the court at the rear of the house, taking up a significant part of the court. Their

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<sup>114</sup> *ibid* 55.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid* 55.

investment seems to have paid off, as the house eventually expanded and took over part of an adjoining house.<sup>116</sup>

Other industries required skill sets beyond what the women of the house may have already known. The presence of unfinished stelai (grave markers) and altars in one house suggests the presence of a mason. Manufacturing is also present, a manufacturer of sling bullets lived in the south section of the city.<sup>117</sup>

All together, household industry was incredibly common at Olynthus, suggesting that the middle class was not a small percentage of the population as it was in Mycenae, but made up a significant group of Olynthians.

### *Conclusion*

In Olynthus there is strong evidence for the presence of a middle class. A general economic boom across all of Greece during indicates that the standard of living in Greece was increasing, suggesting that such economic wealth spread to Olynthus as well. Such economic opportunity provides the kind of environment in which a middle class can emerge. Variation in housing indicates that there was stratification in wealth throughout Olynthus. Finally, the presence of independent paths to wealth through household industry allowed middle class to exist and support itself. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that a significant middle class presence existed in Olynthian society.

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid* 57.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid* 58.

## **CHAPTER 3 – LATE REPUBLICAN/EARLY IMPERIAL ROME:**

### **POMPEII**

Of the three societies discussed, (Bronze Age Greece, Classical Greece, and Rome) Roman society was undoubtedly the most economically complex. Whereas Bronze Age and Classical Greece had some economic interaction with fellow Aegean societies, Rome was a burgeoning economic hub. With economic complexity comes class complexity, and the middle classes in Roman society are much more elaborate and complex than in their Greek counterparts. Teasing out the nature of class in Rome turns out to be just as snarly as in Bronze Age or Classical Greece, but instead of searching for the middle class instead with more information about Roman society it becomes less clear who qualifies as middle class.

This chapter will discuss the presence of the Roman middle class in the Late Republic/Early Empire. I will endeavor to discuss not only if there was a middle class presence and how large it was, but also how the middle class lived and what they were like. The Late Republic/Early Empire was chosen based on archaeology; our best preserved Roman city is Pompeii. Pompeii is an indispensable resource because it gives us a near perfect snapshot of a particular time period in Roman history, as houses, people, and artifacts were immaculately preserved beneath the ash from Vesuvius.

#### *History of Class in Roman Society*

Before launching into a discussion of the Roman middle class, it is necessary to define exactly who qualified as middle class in Rome. As noted in the introduction, the middle class is an artificial catch-all category for people who fall between the extremes of society. Thus the

middle class is perhaps most easily defined by what it is not. In turn, this leaves us needing to precisely define upper and lower class. To better understand the nature of these class boundaries and allow us to create accurate definitions, let us first turn to a brief history of class in Rome.

The history of Roman social classes is as old as Rome itself. Rome began as an agricultural settlement on the Tiber in 753 BC.<sup>118</sup> It was ruled by Kings from the time of its founding to 510 BC. Undoubtedly there was some class stratification in this time, if only between the royal family and everyone else. However due to the scanty sources and semi-mythological nature of Roman history at this time class is difficult to interpret under the monarchy. After the fall of the Kings, it appears that the power vacuum left behind led to the rapid consolidation of power in the upper class in the new Republic

The original upper class of Rome were the patricians. The patricians were a select group of rich families who controlled Roman society through inheritance and hereditary rights. In the early republic only members of patrician families could hold office. They also had complete control over priestly offices, and therefore religious life in Rome.<sup>119</sup> These families owned extensive tracts of land, had full political rights, often became senators, and did not work for their own living but rather lived off their accumulated fortune.

As opposed to the patricians were the plebeians, who included everyone else. This must have been a huge and diverse category, ranging from poor laborers to rich merchants, effectively both the lower and middle (insomuch as it existed at this time) classes.

Conflict between the plebeians and the patricians was inevitable, since the patricians had most of the rights while the plebeians had most of the people. This “Struggle of the Orders” during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century, which Marx refers to in the opening lines of *The Communist*

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<sup>118</sup> Boatwright, Mary Taliaferro., Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J.A. Talbert. *A Brief History of the Romans*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2006) 20.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid* 29.

*Manifesto*, led to some gains by plebeians, including the creation of the Tribune of the Plebs,<sup>120</sup> the ability to be elected to consulship,<sup>121</sup> and the ability to intermarry between orders.<sup>122</sup> The competition between the classes was bitter and often turned ugly. For example, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus were two brothers who each were Tribune of the Plebs in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century. They each sought to reform land ownership by redistributing large plots of land to plebeians. They were each feared and loathed by the wealthy patricians who were afraid of losing their holdings, and were each assassinated for their pains.<sup>123</sup>

The conflict between patricians and plebeians laid the groundwork for class divisions in the Later Roman Republic. In this framework, the patricians held the power politically, religiously, and in terms of land ownership, firmly establishing the patricians as the upper class. Membership in the patrician order was therefore the necessary qualification to be upper rank. As always, the boundary between middle and lower class is more difficult to ascertain. However it seems that there must have been richer members of the plebian order who wielded some political power and to these people we may tentatively assign the title “middle class.”

There are two groups among the plebeians which require some additional explanation before we continue on to how class structure changed in the Late Republic/Early Empire. The first of these is the equites. The equites have their origins, like the patricians, in the murky early history of Rome and so there is some guesswork as to their exact beginnings. It appears that the equites were the Roman cavalry in its early days, or perhaps merely mounted hoplites, and so held higher status than mere infantry.<sup>124</sup> Another thought is the equites were the original body

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<sup>120</sup> *ibid* 30.

<sup>121</sup> Finley, M. I. *The Ancient Economy*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1973) 45.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid* 45.

<sup>123</sup> Boatwright, Mary Taliaferro., Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J.A. Talbert. *A Brief History of the Romans*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2006) 92-97.

<sup>124</sup> Hill, Herbert. *The Roman Middle Class in the Republican Period*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952.) 2.

guards of the King.<sup>125</sup> Livy writes of them as falling in between the patricians and the plebeians, though still technically part of the plebeians.<sup>126</sup> Thus though technically not upper class, since they were not patricians, the equites possessed considerable social prestige and wealth. In the Republican period membership in the equestrian class required significant personal property.<sup>127</sup>

Because they were legally barred from participating in politics due to not being patricians, the equestrians turned to commerce and finance as a means of making money.<sup>128</sup> This led this already wealthy section of plebeian society to grow even wealthier. As they increased in wealth and status, the equites began to blend with the patricians. By the time of the Early Empire the equites for all intents and purposes were simply another flavor of upper class Romans. Augustus's own father came from an equestrian family. Thus it is important to consider the time period before grouping the equites with the middle class or the upper class. Since this study focuses on the Late Republic/Early Empire, I will group them with the upper classes. They were rich, often would not have had to work personally, and members of their class gained significant political authority.

The second group which merits specific mention is freedmen. Unlike being a patrician or an equites, "freedman" was not an inherited title but a statement of origins. Freedmen were either born slaves or became slaves later in life, and thereafter ascertained their freedom. While technically free, freedmen lacked all of the political rights of their free counterparts, for example they could not run for office. However the kinds of slaves who were most likely to achieve their freedom were those who possessed special skills, and so group "freedmen" was an unusually

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid* 2-3.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid* 45.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid* 47.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid* 47.

talented one.<sup>129</sup> We will see that while their status as freedmen ostensibly restricted them from joining the ranks of the upper class, freedmen could rise to great wealth through economy and trade.

By the time of Pompeii's destruction, many of these traditional class boundaries had begun to break down. Rather than the patrician/plebian divide, more and more Romans were identifying as either "optimates" or "populares". Optimates referred to those politicians who represented the old order but did not necessarily fit into the old order; Cicero for example counted himself among the optimates, though he was the first man in his family to join the senate. The populares on the other hand were populists who advocated for change and more rights for the traditional plebian group. The brothers Gracchii and Julius Caesar would both fall into this category.

The changing political landscape also had a huge impact on class structure. Rome was transitioning from republic to autocracy. The patricians, who had been forced to make limited concessions to the plebeians, found themselves losing relevance as the senate became less important under the Emperor. Over the course of his career, Augustus reduced the number of senatorial members from 1,000 to 600.<sup>130</sup> Their power was also being eclipsed by other rich segments of society, such as the equites, who had grown so rich and powerful they seemed indistinguishable from their patrician counterparts. Unlike the senate, the equites gained from the ascension of Augustus, who tapped into their financial talents and made many of them members of his private staff.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Treggiari, Susan. *Roman Freedmen During the Late Republic*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 11.

<sup>130</sup> Boatwright, Mary Taliaferro., Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J.A. Talbert. *A Brief History of the Romans*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2006) 187.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid* 187.



Rome as a rapidly growing empire was also changing economically which caused shakeups in the traditional class order. The population of Rome exploded from about 300,000 adult males in 131 BC to over 4 million in 23 BC, not including women, children, or slaves.<sup>132</sup> With such a large population boost industry in the Roman Empire booming. Patrician families who could not keep up with the new times found themselves left behind, and upper class women suddenly found themselves married to “new men”, that is men who were the first in their family to join the senate, such as Cicero.

This kind of environment is ideal for middle class growth; there is great economic opportunity, however there are societal rules in place which prevent new money from leaping into the category of “upper class”.

#### *Definition of Middle Class in Roman Society*

Now we can turn to drawing up a working definition of middle class. First, let us define the boundary between upper class and middle class. In the Late Republic/Early Empire, the upper classes in Rome felt threatened by the growing economic success of the people underneath them, but the original patrician families of Rome, along with the equites, still held most of the political influence and religious authority. Being middle class meant a lack of political power, whether this meant being legally barred from running for office in the case of freedmen, or simply lacking the kind of political influence and clout that rich senatorial families possessed.

One's profession also served as a marker between the upper and middle classes in Rome. Upper class Romans owned significant property and made their living through their inherited wealth. Engaging in commerce and other business like activities were lower status activities. It is

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<sup>132</sup> Scheidel, Walter, Ian Morris, and Richard P. Saller. *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007) 516.

important to note that according to this marker the equestrians would fall into middle class status, though they wielded political influence. Thus, I argue that in Rome one's political status tended to outweigh profession in determining class membership.

At the other end of the spectrum, the boundary between lower and middle class is determined by one's level of autonomy. Slaves and poor laborers were not economically autonomous, as they heavily relied on others for their livelihood. This is a fundamentally different condition from say your average potter, who may not be living a glorious life but is far more independent than a slave might be. Being dependent on another for one's material well-being meant being part of the lower class, since you were easily exploited and abused. On the other traders and small businessmen who had more control over their own lives were part of the middle class.

Thus, the working definition of the middle class is as follows; a member of the middle class is someone who is not a slave and is economically autonomous. However members of the middle class are divided from the upper class by one or both of the following reasons; not having full political power, or working for one's living.

In all societies there are groups which do not fall neatly into class definitions, and in the case of Rome women are a great example. Women are born into the same class as their father's family, however when they marry they become part of their husband's family, which explains why some patrician women would be thoroughly mortified at the thought of marrying a new man. Divorce in Roman society had no social stigma attached to it and was frequently done, at which point women presumably returned to the social class of their original family. However, any children produced from a marriage belonged firmly to the husband's family even in the case of divorce. In the case of a husband's death, women may feel compelled to remain with their

children and therefore their marriage family. Thus, the class status of women was a fluid thing, and deeply intertwined with marriage.

It should be noted that this definition makes the middle class an extremely diverse category, running the gamut from the poorest person eking out a living in their trade to rich merchants. There were dramatic differences in status within the middle classes. Many of these nuances were related to one's profession. Cicero writes of the differing statuses of professions in his *De officiis*. The lowest status professions were those "which incur ill will"<sup>133</sup> such as money lending. He also sneers at professions which are solely for the purpose "Illiberal, too, and mean are the employments of all who work for wages, whom we pay for their labor and not for their art."<sup>134</sup> High status professions contributed to society, such as medicine or architecture or teaching.<sup>135</sup>

Cicero's explanation should be taken with a grain of salt since there is considerable moralizing involved, for example he considers agricultural labor to be the best profession of all, "none more fruitful, none sweeter, none more fitting for a free man", a philosophical perspective which may not have been shared by general population. After all, farming was hard work, and Cicero probably did not have any personal experience with it. However there probably was some truth to his statements. Certainly even today we attribute different status levels to different jobs, many would agree that being a doctor is of higher status than being a janitor.

In many ancient societies it is common to see a huge gap between rich and poor, leading to a small or even non-existent middle class. But with the aforementioned growing economic complexity in Rome, the middle class grew to be a significant segment of the population. One of the best sources we have on population composition are tomb inscriptions. Based on the twenty-

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<sup>133</sup> Finley, M. I. *The Ancient Economy*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1973) 41.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid* 41.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid* 42.

two thousand tomb inscriptions which survive to use from the city of Rome, a third of the names are definitively either freedmen or freeborn persons who may have been the children of freedmen, all of whom fall into our definition of the middle class. The other two thirds are people whose class statuses are unknown, and could have been either slaves, freeborn, or freedmen.<sup>136</sup> From this evidence alone, we can see that the Roman middle class made up a significant portion of Roman society.

With the definition of middle class in hand and the assurance that the middle class made up a significant portion of society, we can now turn to our type site, Pompeii.

### *Description of Pompeii*

Pompeii began not as a Roman city but as a Samnite city founded sometime in the sixth century BC.<sup>137</sup> While the first several centuries of Pompeii are largely unknown to us, by the second century BC Pompeii was a flourishing Hellenistic town, speaking Oscan. They were legal allies of the Roman state, which meant Pompeiians were required to serve in military campaigns but received no political benefits for doing so. Pompeii at this time was an elegant town, focused on Greek culture and learning.

Along with many other allies of Rome seeking greater political rights Pompeii joined the Social War against Rome in 91 BC, and lost. This led to a period of Roman colonization. During this time there are visible archaeological changes in Pompeii as the town became a blend of new Roman customs with its Hellenistic origins. By the time of Pompeii's destruction, the town

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<sup>136</sup> Lily R. Taylor, "Freedmen and Freeborn in the Epitaphs of Imperial Rome", *The American Journal of Philology*. 82.2 (1961) 117.

<sup>137</sup> Zanker, Paul. *Pompeii: Public and Private Life*. Trans. Schneider Deborah. (Lucas. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) 31.

featured elements of both heritages; including a gymnasium, an arena, and temples to both Greek and Roman Gods.

In 62 AD Pompeii experienced its first natural disaster; a tremendous earthquake hit the city and caused widespread destruction. The Emperor Nero, bitter at Pompeii for a supposed assassination plot, refused to fund the city's recovery. Thus Pompeii was rebuilding itself slowly, and many of its elegant but less important buildings still had not rebuilt by the time of its final destruction. The earthquake also affected the population makeup of the city; many richer citizens abandoned the ailing city, making Pompeii less affluent place. Pompeii met its final end in 78 AD when Mount Vesuvius erupted.



*Figure 10 – The Pompeian Forum as it stand today, with Mount Vesuvius in the background.*

Because of the eruption, the entire city was effectively preserved under ash. A lot can be gleaned about the middle class from domestic space, and we shall now turn to examine middle class houses in Pompeii.

### *Middle Class Housing in Pompeii*

One of the most notable middle class dwellings in Pompeii is the House of the Vettii. The House of the Vettii was excavated from 1894 to 1896. While at this time Pompeii was not being excavated with the care and detail that later generations would have liked, it appears that the House of the Vettii was treated more gently due to its state of preservation and obvious wealth.<sup>138</sup> It was built before the earthquake of 62 CE, but what the house may have looked like then or who owned it is long since lost to us. After the earthquake, the house was rebuilt and remodeled in Pompeian 4<sup>th</sup> style by two brothers; A. Vetius Restitutus and A. Vettius Conviva, who are collectively known as the Vettii.

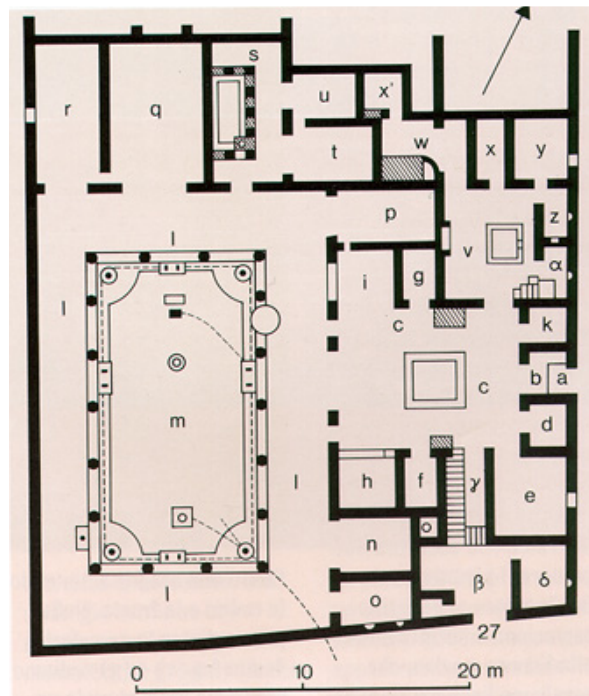
The house is located in the north of Pompeii, in what probably was known as the Vicus Saliniensis.<sup>139</sup> It was a block or two away from the Via de Stabia, which crosses the entire city from the northwest to the southeast. The House is removed from the hustle and bustle of the city, located a significant distance away from the Forum and the Theater District and nearly clear across the city from the Arena. It is located in what appears to have been a wealthy, upper class neighborhood. The House of the Faun, famed for its huge size, beautiful paintings, elaborate mosaic of Alexander the Great, and general character as an elegant opulent Oscan mansion is located across the street on one side. Across the street on the other side is the House of the

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<sup>138</sup> Allison, Penelope M. "Pompeian Households: On-line Companion." *The Stoa Consortium*. Web. 09 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.stoa.org/projects/ph/home>>.

<sup>139</sup> Roger Ling, "A Stranger in Town: Finding the Way in an Ancient City", *Greece & Rome*. 37 (1990) 205.

Orpheus, and next door is the House of the Gilded Cupids. All four of these houses are among the largest at Pompeii.



*Figure 11 – Floor plan of the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the House of the Vettii*

141 *ibid.*

At this point a casual reader may wonder why a discussion of the Roman middle class appears to have diverged into the description of what seems like an upper class mansion. What distinguishes the House of the Vettii as a middle class dwelling is the people in it; the Vettii brothers were freedmen. Their seemingly paradoxical status as wealthy residents in an upper class neighborhood who are *freedmen* make them an interesting case study for the middle class.

The House of the Vettii is a mix of both conventional and unique elements. On the one hand, the House fits in with the atrium-peristyle houses surrounding it. It contains not one but two atria, and a beautiful inner peristyle where one might imagine the Vettii brothers relaxed during hot Italian afternoons. The building is painted in 4<sup>th</sup> style, which was fashionable for the time, and the house boasts an impressive collection of wall paintings.

On the other hand, the House of the Vettii lacks a tablinum, a key room featured in most Roman houses of similar size where a patron might receive clients. The house lacks shops, which many businessmen would have made room for in their homes. There is also a surprising emphasis on privacy for a Roman mansion. Many large Roman houses were designed to be open to the public to flaunt one's wealth and status. The Vettii however chose that none of the rooms along the main street of their house had open access. These rooms were used for storage.<sup>142</sup> The House of the Vettii also features what may be one of the few, or perhaps only, examples of autobiographical art in a Roman house, to be discussed later.

The peculiar quirks of the House of the Vettii can be explained by the status of their occupants, who were merchants and businessmen, but most importantly they were freedmen. For example, the tablinum was the traditional sitting room used by the Roman elite to receive their clients. Since the Vettii had no clients since they had limited political rights, why have a

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<sup>142</sup> "The House of the Vettii." *The House of the Vettii*. MIT. Web. 9 Nov. 2010.



tablinum! The greater emphasis on privacy may also be a feature of their class. While it is only speculation, one might imagine that the Vettii had had hard lives as slaves, with an utter lack of privacy. So now as rich men, the Vettii may have been less concerned with flaunting themselves publically as rich men, and simply wished to settle down in peace.

Furthermore, their status as freedmen explains how such a rich and opulent house belongs firmly to the middle class. The Vettii brothers are a great example of the strange nether region freedmen occupied in the social structure of Roman society. They are clearly wealthy, they live in what is the Pompeiian equivalent of Beverly Hills, but they are fundamentally divided from their neighbors by virtue of their birth. Without full political rights, one can hardly call the Vettii brothers member of the upper class. Thus they fall into the highly diverse and varied middle class.

It is interesting to note that despite the circumstances of their birth, the Vettii seamlessly immerse themselves in the culture of upper class Romans. The language of their house perfectly communicates “Roman elite”, and if it were not for the discovery of their names we may have never have known that two freedmen owned the house. One of the ways the Vettii communicate “Roman elite” is through the layout of their house. Humbler Pompeiian houses may have only one type of living space; less wealthy people would not expect to receive guests and so did not design their houses to be public spaces. This is in stark contrast to upper crust households, who intended parts of their house to be open to the public. The more impressive areas of houses are designed along long axes so from the street one might glimpse deep into the luxurious sanctuary.<sup>143</sup> The Vettii replicate this perfectly. From the side entrance of the House of the Vettii

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<sup>143</sup> Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994) 18.

one can see straight through an atrium into the peristyle, offering any passerby an intimate glimpse of the affluence of the Vettii.

It should be noted that while paintings coded for upper class Romans, it was not only the elites who had them. Many modest houses in Pompeii were decorated in a manner similar to elite houses, featuring the familiar mythological motifs seen in upper class houses.<sup>144</sup> This shows that middle class Romans were consciously imitating elite Romans. What separates the Vettii from these modest imitations of high class is that the Vettii simply do not imitate the domestic architecture of Roman elite, they seamlessly integrate themselves into it by a combination of painting style and domestic architecture.

Aside from noting the placement and role of mythological paintings, it is worth looking at the subject of said paintings and what they might say about the Vettii. In particular, in one room are images of cupids, including a series of cupids performing a variety of menial tasks. They are pouring wine, spinning wool, and so on. It appears that the Vettii here are acknowledging their own rise to wealth, possibly through the wine industry. However, they soften the idea by removing any indication that this may have been in fact hard work. They cloak it in the guise of Cupids, making it seem like it was a pleasant and relaxing business. One might imagine that they soften the story of their rise to wealth because of the status markers associated with it; working for one's living was an indication of middle class status. The Vettii simultaneously own the fact that they rose from humble working origins, but elevate themselves by making such work easy and light-hearted.

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<sup>144</sup> *ibid* 169.



*Figure 12 – The Cupids of the House of the Vettii*

The logical question is how did two former slaves make so much money? The answer lies in what surely must have been brilliance and tenacity on the part of the Vettii brothers and the historical time period they were working in. After the earthquake of 62, a great many rich families in Pompeii moved out. This created a huge vacuum of wealth at the top of Pompeian society, creating a sudden rise in social mobility.<sup>145</sup> This allowed people like the Vettii to make money and become what can be only described as “new money”. One can only imagine what the established upper classes who remained in Pompeii thought, suddenly finding themselves the neighbors of former slaves.

So what does the House of the Vettii say about middle class life at Pompeii? The Vettii can show us the opportunities that existed for members of the middle class, and the heights to which working people might rise. It also shows that the middle class was culturally continuous

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<sup>145</sup> "The House of the Vettii." *The House of the Vettii*. MIT. Web. 9 Nov. 2010.

with the upper class, as merchants and traders became richer they sought to emulate the upper classes as opposed to creating new styles. However, it may seem that the Vettii are only middle class citizens by virtue of a technicality. The Vettii are living as richly as any of their upper class neighbors, and belong to the middle class only by virtue of their birth. Middle class is often associated with having modest wealth, so the Vettii may perhaps be better labeled upper middle class. Thus, we will now turn to a more modest dwelling.

The House of the Ceii is located in the southern part of Pompeii in what was probably known as the Vicus Forensis,<sup>146</sup> just off the Via di Stabia. It is only a block away from the theater district, so this neighborhood experienced much more hustle and bustle than the elegant neighborhood of the Vettii. The house was excavated from 1913 to 1914.<sup>147</sup>

Numerous artifacts recovered from the home, including a Vespasianic coin from 69 AD, suggest that the house remained occupied after the earthquake, and very likely all the way up to the eruption. However it does appear that the house has been heavily looted, either by post-eruption invaders or by the original inhabitants fleeing to safety with their possessions. The absence of any bodies in the house may suggest that the inhabitants of the home did indeed reach safety.<sup>148</sup>

The House of the Ceii is 300 square meters,<sup>149</sup> about 3000 square feet, which is less than a third of the House of the Vettii. Still, the house shows many of the same design elements as its richer neighbors. It possesses both an atrium and an inner peristyle, but on a much more modest scale. There are no rooms off the front of the atrium, which takes up nearly half the house. The house still retains some sense of being open to the public, from the front door one can see

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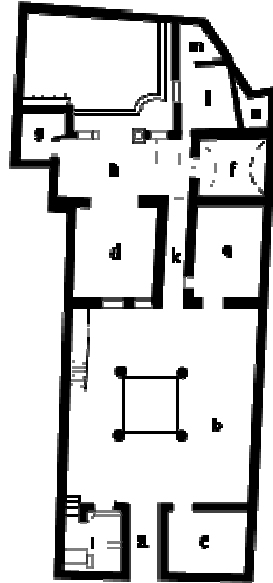
<sup>146</sup> Roger Ling, "A Stranger in Town: Finding the Way in an Ancient City", *Greece & Rome*. 37 (1990) 205.

<sup>147</sup> Allison, Penelope M. "Pompeian Households: On-line Companion." *The Stoa Consortium*. Web. 09 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.stoa.org/projects/ph/home>>.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

directly through the atrium to the back of the house where the garden is. However the rest of the rooms in the house appear to be private areas, as the doors are situated such that the rooms cannot be seen from the front door. There appears to have been a second story.<sup>150</sup>



*Figure 13 – Floor Plan of the House of the Ceii.*

Most of the house is decorated in Third Style, which was slightly outdated by the time of the eruption, except for the garden which was decorated in 4<sup>th</sup> Style. The house also has rooms which appear to have at one time served as tribiculums and cubiculums, although one cubiculum appears to have been converted into storage.<sup>151</sup>

The House of the Ceii is an example of how a more modest Pompeiian would live. Like the Vettii, the house strives to imitate the wealth and splendor of upper class neighbors. However

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<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*

it is clear that the Ceii were not as well off; they do not seamlessly emulate the opulence of the upper class the way the Vettii do. Their house is located in a less desirable location and it has a much smaller floor plan which gives it a cramped feeling. It also lacks the rich finds that we see in places like the House of the Vettii.

As for who the Ceii were or where they came from, not a lot of information is available. I will refrain from making any conjectures about their potential profession or even their free status, as the Vettii have shown us even rich houses can be inhabited by freedmen. Certain limited conclusions can be drawn about the lives of those living in the House of the Ceii. They were well off enough to own a reasonable sized house, but the neighborhood was probably more crowded, smellier, noisier than that of the Vettii. They were well off enough to flee the house during the eruption of Vesuvius, but the lack of any bodies left guarding the house suggests they did not own any slaves. Everything about their home in fact, speaks to us of an average life.

While one may imagine that the House of the Ceii is more typical of the average Pompeian experience, it is important to note that the Ceii certainly were not *poor*. They still possessed the means to live in a relatively comfortable house. Unfortunately not much information is available on dwellings much smaller than the House of the Ceii. Likely this is so because humble abodes are less popular to study than glamorous mansions like the House of the Vettii. However, fortunately for this study Pompeii offers us a source which Bronze Age and Classical Greece have which can give us precious insight into the lives of the masses of Pompeii, graffiti.

## *Graffiti in Pompeii*

Pompeian scholar Mau noted that “The cultivated men and women of the ancient city were not accustomed to scratch their names upon the stucco or to confide their reflections and experiences to the surface of a wall; we may assume that the writers were... not representative of the best elements of society”.<sup>152</sup> Mau’s condescending attitude indicates that he did not feel such people worth studying, but his point is well taken. Pompeian graffiti offers us precious insight into the lives of the majority of the Pompeian population, not just the lives of the rich.

Graffiti in Pompeii varied widely, running the gamut from artists depicting local professions to proclamations of love to warnings not to defecate on a particular stretch of wall. In total, there are over 15,000 inscriptions surviving to us.<sup>153</sup> The first thing we should take from this is that there must have been a surprisingly high degree of literacy among the middle classes since graffiti was so popular. One inscription jokingly deplores this practice, noting that “Everybody writes on the walls but me.”<sup>154</sup>

With Pompeian graffiti we are faced not with how to interpret a small body of evidence but rather how to organize and make sense of a huge and diverse body of evidence. It is a pleasant change! Therefore I will divide the graffiti into several broad categories and examine each individually.

The first category is graffiti having to do with industry. Obviously industry played a huge role in city life, particularly in that of the middle class, so it is not surprising to see it well represented on the walls of the city. For example take the fullers industry. A fuller’s job was to take cloth from a loom, wash it, treat it, and dye it so it may be ready for consumption. Fullers

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<sup>152</sup> Mau, August, and Francis Willey Kelsey. *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*. (New-York: Mac Millan, 1899)

<sup>153</sup> "Tanzer, Helen H. *The Common People of Pompeii; a Study of the Graffiti*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1939) 6.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid* 6.

were a major staple of the clothing industry, and we know the fullers were one of the most important guilds in Pompeii from their huge guild hall on the Forum known as the Eumachia.<sup>155</sup>

The fullers are mentioned in graffiti inscriptions twenty-four times.<sup>156</sup> Many of these involved elections, such as “Primus the fuller asks for support for Lucius Ceius Secundus as duumvir”<sup>157</sup> showing that the average tradesman was invested in his political environment. There are also a variety of pictures depicting the daily activities of fullers, which are often found in or near fulleries. With such a significant presence of fullers on the walls of the city, one can see how important they were to day to day city life.

One of the most interesting pieces of fuller-related graffiti however says “Ululam ego cano, non arma virumque”. Or, in English, “[Of] the owl I sing, not ‘arms and the man’”.<sup>158</sup> This statement, written by a fuller, is extorting his loyalty to Athena who was patron goddess of fullers. What is interesting is this statement demonstrates not only a passion for religion, but a familiarity with the *Aeneid*. The scrawler parodies the first line of the *Aeneid* precisely, knowing enough of the poem to make pithy statements regarding it. This indicates at least some level of education and literacy among the common folk.

The second category graffiti are details about how the average Pompeian lived. We can garner an extraordinary amount of detail about Pompeian lives simply from the inscriptions on the walls. There is considerable mention of garum, the fish sauce which Pompeii was known for, mura, a liquor made from fish, and olive oil.<sup>159</sup> These were not only important exports but also likely major food staples, and their importance in day to day life is evident by their frequent mention. There is also considerable talk of places to eat, either advertisements for them such as

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<sup>155</sup> *ibid* 8.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid* 13.

<sup>157</sup> *ibid* 13.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid* 14.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid* 33-35



“An inn to be let, the dining room with three couches”<sup>160</sup> or amateur reviews such as “Curse you landlord, you sell water and drink unmixed wine yourself.”<sup>161</sup> One interesting note is the presence of inns and hotel must indicate some movement in and out of the city of middle class people, since upper class visitors to the city likely had friends or contacts to stay with.

The third category of information which graffiti can give us is more qualitative. In the former two categories we garnered considerable information about what the Pompeians did, what sort of industries were popular, and how they spent their free time. But graffiti can also give us a sense of character of middle class Romans, what exactly were they like?

The graffiti from Pompeii gives us an image of middle class people profoundly like ourselves. It shows a group of people who were preoccupied with the things we find ourselves preoccupied with today; sex and love. Sex makes a huge display in graffiti, the walls are covered with proclamations such as “I have buggered men” or “I screwed a lot of girls here” or the less egotistical though still inflammatory “Atimetus got me pregnant.”<sup>162</sup> It is clear that the sex life was alive in kicking in Pompeii, both heterosexual and homosexual. Love also makes frequent appearances. Pompeians reveal their romantic side with lines such as “If anyone does not believe in Venus, they should gaze at my girlfriend”, “Rufus loves Cornelia Hele”, and “No young buck is complete until they’ve fallen in love.”<sup>163</sup> From the graffiti, we can see that Pompeians were as human back then as we are today, and nothing has fundamentally changed about human behavior.

The Pompeians also transmit to us their sense of humor. While many lines of graffiti have serious overtones to them, an equal number if not more are written very much tongue-in-cheek.

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<sup>160</sup> *ibid* 45.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid* 32.

<sup>162</sup> “Graffiti from Pompeii.” *Pompeiana.org*.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*.

It is difficult to read lines such as “Defecator, may everything turn out okay so that you can leave this place” and “Epaphra, you are bald!”<sup>164</sup> without laughing. It is equally difficult to imagine the Pompeians weren’t aware of the laughable nature of their statements. The Pompeians were a vibrant, lively bunch, showing that mankind’s zest for life has hardly changed as the centuries have worn by.

### *Conclusion*

Of the three societies, the Roman middle class is predictably the largest and the most diverse. The complexity of the Roman economy gave ample opportunity for individuals to find alternative paths to wealth and attain middle class status. These individuals can be seen not only in their domestic architecture as we saw at Olynthus, but they have also left a large written record of themselves in the form of graffiti. In Rome, the middle class was a diverse and flourishing segment of society.

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<sup>164</sup> *ibid.*

## CONCLUSION

Class is a difficult concept to grapple with; it is both an inherently modern idea yet still relevant to thinking about social divisions in ancient societies. It is fundamentally tied to economic complexity and so is gained and lost with it, but also affects and is affected by culture and social attitudes. Teasing out the nature of class and class relationships is difficult enough in modern society; a whole new level of complexity is added when turning to an ancient society with limited sources.

This study examined the middle classes in three separate ancient societies; Mycenaean Greece, Classical Greece, and Late Republican Rome. These societies vary significantly, spanning over a thousand years of history. In Mycenaean Greece a significant portion of analysis was dedicated to proving the existence of middle class, which existed but was likely small. Olynthus has significantly more evidence for a middle class, whose presence can be seen in Olynthian domestic architecture. Late Republican/Early Imperial Rome had the most complex economy and was best attested of the three, so it is not so hard to find the middle class as it is to define who belonged to it. The site of Pompeii offers us excellent archaeological evidence for how they lived, and we hear their voices through the graffiti at Pompeii.

Despite the wide differences between these three societies, overall the things which defined “upper” versus “middle” versus “lower” class remained the same. Upper class meant one had political and religious rights, and did not work for a living. Instead, one lived off inherited land and hereditary rights of superiority. The lower class is defined as those who lack economic autonomy, whether they are slaves or simply incredibly poor. The middle class were those in

between; people who were free and economically autonomous, but had to make a living from the sweat of their own brow.

What is interesting about these definitions of class is they are not so different from how we think of class today. While we have lost some of the institutions that prominently feature in ancient class relationships, namely slavery, some things are the same. We still think of upper class members as people who do not need to work for their living, while lower class people are those who require economic aid. This is one of the most important reasons to study Classics, as it demonstrates how human society has not fundamentally changed through time.

This study also shows how a wide range of evidence can be synthesized to examine a single question. In searching for the middle class in the ancient world, this study employed political history, economic history, written sources ranging from the *Odyssey* to vulgar graffiti, archaeology, history, even ethnographic analogy. Too often one of these sources may be considered in isolation, when they are far more enlightening used in conjunction. This kind of multi-disciplinary analysis is particularly important for Classics, which at its heart is a multidisciplinary subject combining history, archaeology, language, and art.

Finally, this study brings a group of people from ancient society that are not frequently studied to the forefront. It is a shame that the rich and powerful occupy the attention and privilege of modern society; it seems a gross injustice that they dominate the scholarship of ancient society. The people who occupied the middle class were interesting, dynamic, clever, and entrepreneurial. Consider how hard the Vettii must have worked to achieve their wealth, or how those Mycenaean potters must have struggled to make a corner of the world for themselves. The study of these people is worthwhile from an economic, social, even moral perspective, and it is my hope that future studies will turn a critical eye towards illuminating the lives of these people.

If there is one thing to take away from this study it is this; this study shows how the nature of class, and to a certain extent human nature and society, has not changed in the last two thousand years. Economics has always, and probably always will, drive social structure.

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